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# A BROKEN BLOSSOM.

A Novel.

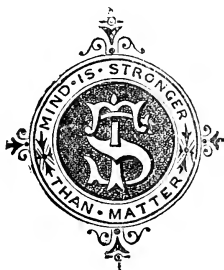
BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF "LOVE'S CONFLICT," ETC., ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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1879.

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Dedicated to

MY DEAREST CHILDREN AND MOST FAITHFUL FRIENDS,

EVA FLORENCE

AND

FRANCIS FREDERICK MARRYAT,

WITH THEIR MOTHER'S PROUD AND GRATEFUL LOVE.

LONDON,

*April, 1879.*







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# A BROKEN BLOSSOM.

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## CHAPTER I.

### ALONE.

I WAS alone—I felt it for the first time in my life—horribly and fearfully *alone*. Everything around me was unchanged, and yet nothing looked the same. The August sun streamed in mercilessly through the white window blind, lighting up every nook and corner of the commonly-furnished room. I had known those ornaments upon the chimney-piece for years past—that Parian figure of Innocence,

pretending to be modest behind a rag of drapery about the size of a housemaid's duster—and that fine Court gentleman in imitation Dresden, who never left off beckoning to the lady who stood opposite to him, hiding her face coquettishly behind a fan. I had heard the tick of the carriage clock, which was one of the very few remnants left of our former luxury, ever since I could remember anything, without having noticed that it was particularly loud; and I had trodden and re-trodden the green and red Brussels carpet beneath my feet without having observed that it was woven in the colours of a macaw. But now, as I sat in the armchair, with my hands folded listlessly upon my lap and my blistered eyes staring vacuously at all around me, the rag with which Innocence defended her modesty appeared so ludicrously small, and the smirk of the lady and gentleman courtiers such a veritable leer, that I burst

into a nervous hysterical giggle as I caught sight of them. The tick of the clock upon the mantelpiece, too, seemed to strike like a hammer on my empty, bewildered brain ; and I perceived, to my horror, that a blue and yellow worsted, that made me shudder each time I looked at it, was twisted amongst the red and green pattern of the carpet. It appeared strange to me that I should never have observed that glaring blue and yellow line before, when it seemed to stand out now from the rest of the design as if the carpet were all yellow and blue, and nothing else. What a fool I must have been all these years to imagine it was red and green ! The idea of my folly was so ludicrous that I began to giggle again, and ended in a burst of tears that left me no better than before. I had shed so many tears during the last week, they seemed to have lost their effect upon me. They only inflamed my eyes anew, and

caused their lids to smart more. I felt cold, too, although the day was unusually warm, and my head was like a ball of fire. After a while I rose, and, leaning my elbows on the mantelpiece, stared at myself in the glass. People had called me pretty sometimes, and I believed that they spoke the truth, but few would have said so now.

My eyes were dull and fishy; my complexion sodden; my hair rough and in disorder. I looked to myself like an old woman; older than *she* had done when I had seen her last with her own living face upon her.

It was a week now since she had left me—eight whole days; and I was still alive. It seemed marvellous to me!

I was not a young girl—I had completed my twenty-fourth year; and I knew, of course, that the majority of daughters were called upon to see their mothers leave this world

before them. But then my mother had not been like other women's mothers. She was my friend and companion—my second self—the only confidante I had ever made. We had almost grown up together, for there were but eighteen years between us, and I felt utterly stunned and lost to think that she could go and leave me behind her—*alone*. How often we had talked together of leaving the rooms we had occupied so long at Norwood, and travelling, in the modest style our limited means would admit of, through Switzerland and Germany and France! Unless I married, meanwhile, she said with a smile (knowing well there was not a man on earth who had the power to separate me from her), we really must think of breaking up our English establishment this autumn, and making a move southward—that is, if Mr. Lovett approved of the plan.

Mr. Lovett was a personage of whom I

had often heard, but never seen. He was a clergyman, and had been an intimate friend and schoolfellow of my late father, and my mother held his name in infinite respect. He was the trustee also of our small capital, and the quarterly interest of it always came to us through his hands. He lived abroad, which was the reason I had never met him, but his name was as familiar to me as a household word. If Mr. Lovett approved, then, my dear mother had said, we should travel together that autumn, and I had been looking forward to the novel pleasure with unmixed delight. And now, the autumn had not yet come, and she was—*where?* As these thoughts recurred to me, I pressed both my hands to my head to prevent my screaming aloud. It was too horrible—too dreadful—I could not realise it!

She had been so well, and we had been so happy, until two short weeks before. She



was only forty-two years of age, and very youthful-looking; our friends had often said, in jest, that I was the older and the graver of the two. She was a tall woman, with an unusually fine figure, and a bright speaking face that would have looked young to the last; a soft, fair complexion, sunny blue eyes, and a mouth that was always ready for a kiss. She had a happy temperament, too, that ever looked on the brighter side, and was capable of taking the keenest enjoyment and interest in everything that was beautiful in Art or Nature.

If I had ever thought of death coming between us two, it was of dying myself, with my head on that dear bosom, and those kind eyes fixed on me to the last. But if *she* would have suffered in that instance as *I* had suffered during the past fortnight, I thanked God for singling me out as His victim.

At that phase of my existence I felt there was nothing else to thank Him for.

Eight days before, she had been with me, struggling, it is true, in the last throes of the fearful malady that separated us, but still there, with her dear blue eyes, grown meek with suffering, turned lovingly to me, and her hot, fevered hand able to acknowledge the clasp of mine. And then arrived that awful moment when the light faded and the grasp relaxed, and they half pulled, half pushed me out of the room ; and something seemed to burst in my head, and make a thousand wheels, like the burring of machinery, go round and round in my brain, until they expended themselves like fireworks, and went out one after another, and my spirit escaped somewhere into a land of darkness and forgetfulness. As soon as I came to myself again, and they would let me leave my room, I rushed to *her*.

I could not believe but that she was still living: that she yet could open her eyes and look at me, or clasp my hand. I rushed into the room and ran straight up to the bed; but I had been absent for an hour, and the officious attendants had already what they termed 'laid her out.' I pulled off the sheet impetuously, intending to cast myself upon her breast, but drew back in horror.

That straightened flattened figure, like a bad model made in discoloured wax—those dark, closed, sunken eyes—that pinched and drawn-down nose—those livid, half-parted lips—they never belonged to the mother who bore me. As well assure me that the house I see fallen to decay, with clouded panes and shuttered windows and stained walls, is the same that I have passed when the sunlight played on every square of glass, and dainty lace curtains shaded, and many-coloured blossoms ornamented every sill. It was the

casket that had once enshrined her soul, I knew ; but that it was my mother, I never realised. It was my first view of the common change—so common and yet always so strangely new—and it was my first and last view of the shape that had held what was so dear to me. I clasped both my hands before my eyes, and fled from it in loathing. They called me unnatural and hard, and begged of me to look at it again ; but no persuasions could induce me to re-enter the chamber. On the contrary, I sat in my own room, trying hard to forget I had ever seen it. I wanted to remember my mother at her best and brightest. I wanted to think of her as she had appeared to me as a little child—when I had thought her the cleverest and most beautiful and most wonderful of created beings—who knew everything and could do everything, and read my mind before I had expressed it. And I wanted to think of her as

she had been to the last—my friend and companion, who sympathised in all my troubles and took pleasure in all my joy. And I felt as if the happier remembrance could never come back to me while *that* remained in the room that had been hers, lying stark and stiff upon the bed, or cased within its narrow coffin, with a sheet drawn over it to keep off the flies, and a few July roses lying prone upon its sunken surface. Ah! how I suffered during those days of waiting, heaven and my own heart only knew. I longed for two things only: that the dreaded funeral might be over and done with, and I might be able to go away somewhere—no matter where, so long as the place was very distant from that in which I had been so miserable—and that I might never see any of the things again by which I was then surrounded.

And now one of my wishes had been realised, and I had followed the dark coffin to

Norwood Cemetery, and seen it lowered into a grave dug in the grass. And I had come back to the house again, to find it still more empty than before.

That was yesterday. The people of the house had drawn up the blinds again, and the chamber in which she had died was having 'a regular turn out.' I could hear the maid-servants from where I sat, throwing the case-ments wide, and laughing with one another as they shook the bed and pillows, and smartly swept the carpet which had been innocent of broom so long. I heard them rattling the glass and china, and moving the furniture about the room, and my heart sickened afresh at the unusual sound of bustle. Pshaw! what did it matter, after all? They could not disturb her, lying six feet under ground in Norwood Cemetery; and as for me, I must get used to such things. Yet, for all that, my lip was quivering terribly as a knock at the

door caused me to turn from the looking-glass to confront my landlady, Mrs. Medlicott.

‘Mr. Warrington wishes to speak to you, if you please, miss.’

Mrs. Medlicott’s voice was unusually low and subdued. You would have thought, to hear her, that butter would not melt in her mouth; and to me, who knew how spiteful and shrill her tones could be on occasions, the change was irritating. What had happened to me more than to others, that a common lodging-house keeper should presume to show me compassion!

‘Show him in,’ I answered, almost sharply.

Mr. Warrington was my mother’s solicitor. I had seen him at the funeral yesterday, as I had seen the rest of the mourners, through a sort of misty haze, but we had not spoken to each other. I knew he came to talk to me now about money, and my future mode of

living, and my soul sickened at the mere idea ; but nothing could make me worse than I was, so I said : ‘ Show him in.’

Mr. Warrington was not at all like the conventional family lawyer. He was a fashionable man in appearance, not more than forty, and always looked distinguished, in well-cut clothes, trimly-arranged hair, and a fresh bouquet in his button-hole. To-day it was composed of lilies of the valley and gardenias ; and the faint smell of the latter blossom recalled to my mind, I could not tell why, the painful scene of yesterday, with so much acuteness, that I felt as though I must tear it from his breast and trample it under foot. But I schooled myself to raise my heavy eyes in his direction, and greet him with composure. Then we shook hands in complete silence.

‘ I trust I have not called upon you too early, Miss Marsh,’ commenced Mr. Warring-



ton ; ‘but I was anxious to see if I could be of any use, and also to have a little conversation with you about your money-matters.’

‘Yes?’ I said, interrogatively.

‘I received a letter this morning, also, from your trustee, Mr. Lovett, the contents of which he is desirous I should communicate to you. You have no personal knowledge of Mr. Lovett, I believe, Miss Marsh?’

‘None whatever!’

‘But you are aware, I suppose, that your—your late mother’s income was derivable from a pension granted her on your father’s death, in recognition of his scientific discoveries, and a sum of money vested in East India property which realised about one hundred and fifty pounds a year?’

‘Yes ; I have heard so.’

‘The Rev. Horace Lovett, who was your father’s most intimate friend, was left trustee for this small property during your

mother's lifetime. At her death it was to revert, unconditionally, to you; but Mr. Lovett is still willing to continue his trust, if you wish it, and will re-appoint him to the charge.'

'I have no choice in the matter. You had better arrange it all, Mr. Warrington.'

'But shall I seem impertinent if I ask you what you intend to do?'

'I have no intentions of any sort.'

'You will not continue to live here?'

'Oh no! I suppose things will settle themselves in due time, and I shall drift on somewhere. It will be all "drifting" henceforward. I cannot look forward to "living" again.'

'No, no; of course not—not for the present; no one could expect it,' replied Mr. Warrington, soothingly. 'But you are too young to live alone, Miss Hilda.'

'Am I? Numbers live alone who are as

young as I am. And I see no alternative.'

'There are several! Young ladies situated as you are, generally try to board with some pleasant family; or they have an older lady to live with them, and chaperon them into the world.'

'I shall want no chaperonage,' I said sadly, recalling the arm on which I had leant for so many years; 'neither shall I go out into the world. I am only sure of one thing, that I must leave this place; but whether to go into a convent or on the stage is perfectly indifferent to me. I have no present, Mr. Warrington, and no future! All I desire to do is to forget.'

'Come, come! you mustn't talk to me in that strain,' he answered. 'I know it is quite natural, but it is not like the sensible, philosophical reasoning I have heard you exercise on the behalf of others. You

have doubtless experienced a very heavy loss-----'

'Mr. Warrington, will you be good enough not to speak to me about it? You may say what you like about myself, but nothing, please, -that refers to the past.'

I dreaded breaking down before this hard, cynical man of the world, who looked upon death as the end of all things, and had frequently challenged me to prove to him, by even the feeblest argument, that the soul lived again after it had quitted the body.

'Very well, Miss Hilda,' he replied, nonchalantly; 'your wishes shall be respected in all things. But since you have formed no plans for yourself, may I be permitted to suggest one for you? Mr. Lovett writes me most feelingly on the subject this morning, and proposes that you should go, as soon as ever you please, to St. Pucelle, and form one

of his family circle, as long as it suits your convenience to do so.'

'I go to St. Pucelle!' I exclaimed.

'Why not? It is a charming old-fashioned town, on the very frontiers of the Belgian territory, and Mr. Lovett's family consists of two motherless daughters, who would form pleasant companions for you. Mr. Lovett is not rich, as you may suppose. The salary of a Protestant clergyman abroad is barely sufficient to enable him to live in decent gentility; but he offers, should you go there, to hand you over fifty pounds annually for your own expenses, and I do not think that you will easily find a pleasanter or cheaper home in which to establish yourself. And so eminently respectable, too; living in a clergyman's family, and under the guardianship of your trustee. I hope you will think of the proposal favourably.'

'To go to St. Pucelle!' I repeated vaguely.

Thoughts of the foreign trip that *we* had planned together rushed rebelliously into my mind, and for a few minutes I could not trust myself to speak. But as the mental mist cleared off, I found the plan that Mr. Warrington had proposed a very feasible one.

‘You *cannot* live alone,’ continued the solicitor, earnestly. ‘It is of no use discussing the question. You are too young, and, if you will forgive me for saying so, Miss Hilda, you are much too handsome, to set up house-keeping on your own account. You have your name, and the name of those who are gone, to consider, and I am sure you will never dream of doing anything that would have displeased them.’

No, no,’ I answered, hastily ; ‘but I must have time to think about it.’

I had no friends to consult upon the subject. I suppose there never was a girl who found herself more completely thrown upon the

world than I did. My father had been an only child, and my mother had come from Australia. Brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins, were names unknown to me, except as they related to other people. I was literally my own mistress, and I felt terribly alone in remembering it—I, who had never felt alone in my life before. For the last few years I had believed myself to be so much of a woman, for my experience in some things had been greater than that of other girls, and *she* had made me her intimate companion, and unfolded all her mind to me as I had done mine to her. Now I felt like a little child that wanted advice and guidance, and had no one to depend on but herself. But Mr. Lovett's offer had opened new ideas to me, and I felt it was not to be rejected hastily.

‘I suppose, if I go to St. Pucelle,’ I continued, after a pause, ‘that my stay there will

be perfectly optional, and I shall be able to leave it whenever I choose ?'

'Certainly. I can have no idea that Mr. Lovett wishes to keep you a prisoner there. The proposal is evidently made only with a view to your benefit, and I will make it a proviso in my answer that your actions are to be perfectly uncontrolled. But, at the same time, let me ask what you could possibly do, at your age, in the world by yourself ?'

'Oh, don't worry me !' I said, impatiently ; 'there are a thousand things I could do if I chose, and I will never stay in any family whose habits are uncongenial to me. I have been used to have my own way too much for that !'

Mr. Warrington rose, and commenced smoothing down the nap of his hat, which the crape band of yesterday still encircled.

'Very good, Miss Marsh ! Then I will leave you to consider the matter at your



leisure, and I hope you will give me the first intimation of your decision. I presume you have sufficient money in hand for current expenses ?'

'Yes, yes ; I have everything I want, I answered. I was longing for him to be gone, and leave me to myself. Every moment he stayed recalled the past so vividly to me. After a few more words of courtesy, he bowed himself deferentially out of the room, and I was once more alone.



## CHAPTER II.

### REFUSED.

As soon as he had disappeared, I sat down in my chair and began to think. I might just as well do it then as at any other time. There was nothing for me to do. All my occupation seemed gone for ever. It would have been better if I had been one of the housemaids who were beating up the bed on which she died, with so much cheerful energy ; or if I had had a little brother or sister, any one dependent on me, for whom I should have been obliged to order meals and bestir

myself to amuse or to attend to. But my time was too much my own. Mrs. Medlicott, in deference to my loss, sent up my dinner even without the least reference to me. I had not the poor distraction of annoyance or trouble to divert my thoughts from the great void that had been suddenly made in my life. So I sat with my head buried in my hands, and pondered upon St. Pucelle. The idea of going there, although not positively agreeable, attracted me more than any that had passed through my brain yet. Naturally, I had thought a little of my future. In the pauses when grief had spent itself, and I had wept till I was in a state of insensibility to everything, I had more than once wondered, in a dull sort of way, what was to become of me; but, as I had told Mr. Warrington, whether I went into a convent or on the stage was a matter of perfect indifference. All I wanted was to change my outward sur-

roundings : not to be obliged every morning to pass the closed bedroom door which I had been accustomed to enter with an affectionate greeting ; not to have to sit down at the same table where a chair had always been placed opposite to mine, and eat my meals in solitude ; not, in fact, to have my heart torn every minute by those seeming ‘ nothings ’ which make up the happiness or the misery of every human life.

St. Pucelle could have no power to remind me of all this, although I knew that in my inmost heart I should never forget it. But there I should be in a totally new country—amongst a set of strangers—far from everything connected with the bitter suffering I was undergoing now.

The thought, instead of intimidating me, gave me courage. I seemed to breathe freer when I had decided to accept Mr. Lovett’s offer of a home at all events, for the next

few months ; and I rose, with the first semblance of interest I had experienced in anything since *she* left me, to find an old atlas which was stowed away amongst our small collection of books, and see if St. Pucelle was of sufficient importance to be marked anywhere upon the frontiers of Belgium. I found it, very much screwed up in a corner, it is true, but still distinct enough to be read, close to the Valley of Artois, and on the borders of the celebrated Forest of Piron. The afternoon was merging, by this time, into the dusk of evening, and I was just about to ring the bell and desire the servant to light the lamp, when my attention was attracted by an altercation going on in the hall. Mrs. Medlicott was apparently, if one might judge by sounds, fighting with some one who wished to effect an entrance to her domains.

‘You can’t come in, sir,’ I heard her say,

after a long consultation. 'I couldn't think of allowing it. She ain't fit to see no one—and won't be for days—that's my opinion; and if she was, I'm quite sure as she would never dream of admitting a gentleman at this hour. Why, it's as near dark as can be—and Miss Marsh quite alone, as she is too.'

'Only for a minute!' pleaded a young fresh voice.

Why! it was Charlie—dear old Charlie Sandilands, and she was actually sending him away! Something rushed up to my throat and my eyes, and I felt as if I *must* see him; as if it would do me all the good in the world to look in his honest eyes and feel the warm grasp of his hand. What Mrs. Medlicott thought of my propriety I do not know, but I flew to the drawing-room door, and opening it just wide enough to allow of my voice being heard, exclaimed:

‘Yes, Charlie, come in ; I should like to see you ;’ which caused him quickly to pass the irate landlady on the doormat, and enter my apartment.

I had met Mr. Warrington with dry eyes and a composed voice, and I had intended to do the same by Charlie Sandilands. But we had had so many happy evenings together, when *she* had been present, to laugh at the absurd devotion which this foolish young man persisted in paying me, that the contrast between them and the position in which I now stood struck me too forcibly, and instead of taking the hand he extended to me, I retreated to my armchair again, and burst into a storm of tears.

I had not set eyes on Charlie since she had been attacked with her fatal illness, although his dear good mother had come to me as soon as she had heard of my trouble, and remained with me to the end. All that

had happened since we met last, and all the sad details of which we must speak together, overwhelmed me, and for a few minutes I could do nothing but cry. But then I held out my hand to him, without raising my head, and said :

‘ Oh, Charlie ! you must not think I am not glad to see you ; but you know how much I loved her, and how very miserable I must be.’

‘ Yes, of course, I know all about it,’ he answered, in an awkward manner (men do feel so strangely awkward in the presence of a weeping woman whom they have no right to console) ; ‘ but please don’t mind me, Hilda. I will go away at once, if you wish it ; but I thought I would like to see you, if I could, and tell you how sorry we all are about it.’

‘ Don’t go away just yet,’ I murmured. ‘ I shall be all right presently. We will have a



cup of tea together, and that will do me good. I am not often so silly as this, Charlie ; for, after all, what is the good of crying ? It cannot bring her back again.'

The poor boy looked very uncomfortable at my sad words, of which there was no refutation, and tried to cover their effect by ringing the bell for me. I call him a boy, because we had always looked upon and spoken of him as such, but in reality he was only two years younger than myself. He was the eldest of a large family of children belonging to a widowed friend, and we had been such near neighbours for several years, that we were very intimate. Scarcely a day had passed without our seeing or hearing something of the Sandilands ; and Charlie, who was a clerk in Somerset House, and spent all his days in London, had been used to walk in and out of our little room in the evenings like a tame cat. We made nobody

of Charlie Sandilands ; and though his mother and mine had had many a laugh over his flirtation with me, I looked upon him quite in the light of a brother or a cousin, and took what liberties with him I chose.

When the tea made its appearance, we drank it so silently, that I observed at last that I thought we were holding a Quakers meeting.

‘ I saw you and your brothers in the cemetery yesterday, Charlie,’ I continued, with an effort, believing that if I did not break the ice I should never be able to speak to him at all ; ‘ and I thought it so kind of you to come.’

‘ There was no kindness in it, Hilda. I would not have been absent for worlds.’

‘ Well, I thought it kind. I suppose one feels small attentions at such times more than at others. And *she* was very fond of you, Charlie. She used to call you “ the blue-eyed baby.” ’

‘She was always too good to me, I know that. Though I am not much of a baby, Hilda. I shall be twenty-three next birthday.’

‘What of that? It is experience, not years, that makes our age. You will always be a baby, I think. Your mother has spoiled you so.’

‘Oh, come, that’s not fair! She spoils Willy and Herbert twice as much as she does me! Not that I’m jealous of it, for I hate being coddled.’

‘Ah, don’t hate it, dear. You may live to miss it, as I am doing now.’

‘Mother sent her best love,’ Charlie went on rapidly, feeling he had made a blunder; ‘and said, if it would be any comfort to you, she would be so glad if you would come to us for a few days—or for as long as you like.’

‘I couldn’t, Charlie, thank you. It is very

kind of your mother, and you must tell her so ; but I would rather be alone. Besides, I have work to do at home.'

'You could be as much alone as you liked with us. I'd be sorry for the one who would dare to disturb you. And until your affairs are settled, and all that sort of thing, wouldn't it be better for you, Hilda, to stay with friends, than in these lodgings by yourself?'

'My affairs are already settled, Charlie. I am going to live with my father's old friend, Mr. Lovett, at St. Pucelle.'

'*What?*' cried poor Charlie, thunderstruck at my announcement.

'I am going abroad,' I said, with the selfish indifference that a great trouble gives us to other people's pain. 'I could not stay in Norwood, you know. I should go mad before a month was over my head ; and my greatest desire now is to lose sight of it at

once and for ever. It's very name is hateful to me.'

'Oh, Hilda ! is it possible you are going to leave us ?' he said, in a voice of despair.

'Why, you could never have imagined I should remain here. I have suffered too much for that. I have no home now, and no friends ; and I must try and begin a new existence for myself, if that is possible, where I can wipe out the memory of the past as soon as may be.'

'What will Norwood be without you ?' he exclaimed.

'Oh, Charlie, don't be so ungrateful, when your good mother will still be here, and all your brothers and sisters ! Do you think if I had a mother and a home circle left to me, as you have, that I should give more than an ordinary regret to the departure or arrival of mere friends, however pleasant their company might be !'

‘It is quite different, Hilda. You are not a mere friend to me, and you have known it for a long time past.’

This was one of the speeches which a month ago I should have laughed at merrily, and called him a saucy boy for making. But there was a mournful earnestness in his voice to-day, that, added to the solemnity of my own feelings, forbid my even smiling at him.

‘Please don’t talk like that,’ I said quietly ; ‘the time is past with us for jesting.’

‘But it is no jest, Hilda ; it is truth—reality ! I have loved you for years. Oh, don’t leave Norwood ! Stay with us, and let my mother be your mother, and make me happy. I should be so very, very happy if you were my wife.’

‘*Your wife !*’

The idea seemed sacrilege to me. But the poor boy took my vehement surprise for anger.

‘Oh, I ought not to have said anything about it now. It is unseemly, indecent I have given you pain. But do forgive me, Hilda. I had not the least intention of offending you. It slipped out of my mouth before I was aware of it. The news of your departure was such a dreadful blow!’

‘I am not angry,’ I replied. ‘I do not see why the presence of a great grief should make it indecent to speak of love. It is at such times we want love most. But it can never be spoken of between you and me, Charlie—not seriously; and so I am very sorry you ever spoke of it at all.’

‘Is it impossible, then, that you could ever marry me, Hilda? I have two hundred a year already from Somerset House, and the salary increases annually. I know it is very little, but I could contrive to keep you in the same style in which you have been living,

and my mother would take you to her heart as another daughter.'

I was so troubled for the poor young fellow. I looked up into his blue eyes, and they were actually swimming in tears. I felt I had been a heartless brute to let him go on loving me all this time, and think that it was play. But I could no more have got up a semblance of passion for him, than I could for the table which divided us.

'Charlie!' I said, 'if you had two thousand a year it would make no difference to me. I shall never marry any one. My heart was all hers, and it will lie in her grave till we meet again.'

'You think so now, but you will alter your mind by-and-by, perhaps.'

'Nothing can alter it. And I feel very angry with myself to think that I should have let you grow fond of me, and never found out you were in earnest.'



‘*In earnest!* It is the hope of my life. And I will never give it up until one of us is dead and buried.’

‘What am I to do to convince you it will be of no use?’ I said despondingly. ‘If you will give me your solemn promise of secrecy, Charlie, I will tell you something that I have never told to a single soul, except to *her*; and that I would cut my tongue out sooner than tell you, unless it were to try and repair the wrong which, it seems, I have done you.’

‘You have never done me any wrong,’ replied the poor boy, with the generosity of a true affection. ‘You didn’t mean it, Hilda. It is all my own fault.’

‘But I won’t allow that, Charlie. I have not laid myself out to attract you, it is true; but I am older than you are, and I should have remembered what our intimacy might lead to.’

‘You seem to harp a great deal on the

fact of there being a couple of years' difference in our ages ; but if a man is not a man at two-and-twenty, he never will be.'

'Well, I am going to show you now that I consider you to be a man, and to treat you as such. I have told you that there is a reason why I shall never marry you nor any one ; and that reason is, because—because——'

It was much harder to tell than I had imagined it would be. I felt so much for poor Charlie's disappointment, that I thought I could make any sacrifice in order to salve his wounded feelings ; but nothing is so mortifying to a woman as to have to confess that she has loved in vain.

'Don't go on if you don't wish to,' said Charlie, with ungrammatical consideration, as I paused to gain a little courage.

'Oh yes ; I mean to tell you, that you may

be sure that my refusal has nothing to do with yourself.'

'You care for somebody else!' he exclaimed intuitively.

'No, I don't,' I said, reddening up under the consciousness of telling a lie; 'but I did—that is, I used to—I mean that years and years ago I met some one in whom I was very much interested, as you are in me, and I thought things would have been all right between us; but they never were, and so I shall be Hilda Marsh to the end of my days.'

'Is that *all*?' said Charlie, evidently disappointed at so tame a love-story. 'I shouldn't lose heart over that, Hilda; you'll meet the fellow again some day, and come to an understanding with him; or perhaps you'll forget him, and learn to think of me instead.'

'How utterly I must have failed to make you comprehend my meaning,' I replied. 'Do be convinced, once and for ever, Charlie,

there can be no question of love for me, in this world, again.'

'Is he dead, then?'

'Yes, he is dead—at least to me.'

My face burned as I uttered the words. Charlie received them with a look of blank dismay. Then he said :

'All this has made me feel very miserable, Hilda. I think, perhaps, that I had better go home.'

'Yes, Charlie, I wish you would. It can do you no good to stay here, and the sight of your home may make you feel there are other people less lucky than you are.'

We shook hands in silence, and he crept quietly out of the house. I was very sorry for him, for I knew I possessed influence over him, and I was afraid that he might find some difficulty in shaking it off again. It was as well for him as for myself that I had determined to leave Norwood. The conversation

I had just held had recalled Cave Charteris powerfully to my mind ; and for some time after Charlie had left me, I sat pondering over that epoch in my life, which was so entirely closed and done with, but which yet had left such ineffaceable marks behind it.

It had happened five years before ; but the remembrance was as fresh as yesterday. I had always believed myself most to blame in the matter, whilst my dear mother had unhesitatingly attributed all the wrong to him. But then I had loved the man, and she had only viewed him through the misery he had caused me. I had told Charlie Sandilands but half the story ; it would have blistered my lips to let him know the whole truth.

But from my heart I could have no secrets. As I sat by myself that evening, I recalled every expression of Cave's handsome features, every tone of his thrilling voice, as he lingered, day after day, in our little drawing-

room, or accompanied us in our walks, or on our journeys to town.

I had believed so fully then, and so had *she*, that the most momentous period of my existence had arrived, and that all those walks and talks could end but in one way—the declaration of Cave Charteris's love for me.

For why else had he, over a period of months, attached himself to our side as though he had a right to accompany us everywhere? I had no doubt on the subject, and permitted myself to love him without limit; and my mother looked upon him as her future son, and hailed every good trait in his character as a fresh guarantee for my happiness. And so we had gone on, in our blind belief, until one day, after he had been absent for about a week, I received an affectionate letter from him, claiming my congratulations on the score of his father having, at last, withdrawn his refusal to consent to his travelling on the

Continent for a couple of years, preparatory to his entering the profession of the law. And from that hour I had never heard from him again. His philandering after me proved only to have been the expression of an impatient spirit waiting restlessly to hear its doom, and anxious, meanwhile, to make the weary hours pass away by any means that came easiest to hand.

I know that heaps of women must have deceived themselves after this fashion, and felt it as keenly, perhaps, as I did ; but it seemed to me, in my inexperience of pain, as if nobody had ever suffered so much in this world before.

My dear mother might rave against the dishonour of Mr. Charteris's behaviour to me, as freely as she chose, but we two poor unprotected women had no remedy against it. We could only fly into each other's arms, and weep over it until we could weep no more. I

poured out all my soul to my one true friend and companion, and then we made a compact never to speak of his name to one another again, unless the burden should become too heavy to bear alone.

It was out of this grief that the complete love and reverence I maintained for my lost parent had been finally cemented. Her tenderness and sympathy for me in the great trial of health and spirits that followed, had made her appear more like an angel than a woman in my eyes ; and at the time of her death, it is true that I would not have exchanged her love for that of any man. She had been my one great good in this world, and the Creator of the universe had seen fit to take it away. What wonder was it that both my heart and my soul were in a state of rebellion against Him ?





### CHAPTER III.

#### LAUNCHED.

BEFORE I went to bed that night I wrote to Mr. Warrington, telling him I had decided to accept Mr. Lovett's offer; and before another fortnight was over my head, I was on my way to St. Pucelle. There was no reason for delay, and the few things I had to do, I hurried over as quickly as possible. We had always lived in furnished rooms; one week's notice was sufficient to set me free from them. The books and articles that had belonged especially to my mother found

house-room with my kind friend Mrs. Sandilands. The only possessions I carried away with me were her Bible and her portrait and my own limited wardrobe. I wanted to begin life anew, cumbered with as few reminders of the past as possible.

I did not think, though, that I should find parting with the grave in Norwood Cemetery so hard. I had believed myself to be too philosophical to care about leaving that, any more than the old books that Mrs. Sandilands had taken charge of. But when the time came to say good-bye to it, and that which lay in it, I found I was as stupid, commonplace and non-reasoning an animal as ever wept above an inanimate object that could neither see, hear, nor respond.

Mr. Warrington's cruel arguments came back to my mind, and I found myself wondering if the end of it all had really come, and I was tearing myself away from the only

link that could ever bind me to her again. It was late in the evening, at the close of the last day I was to spend in Norwood, that I stole into the cemetery and found my way, less by sight than by instinct, to the heap of earth, as yet unsoftened by any grass, that covered her. It must be allowed to sink—so the sexton had informed me—before it could be decorated like the other graves.

To sink right down upon *her*—pressing, pressing, with its awful unyielding weight, upon the lid of the coffin which covered that dear dead face—dear, even in spite of its ghastly want of resemblance to that which she had borne in life. I had said good-bye to the Sandilands and all my friends in Norwood; this was to be the last farewell my lips should utter there.

I sank down upon the mound of clay, and wrestled with my agony alone. Where was

she, this beloved mother of mine? Who could tell me, *without any doubt*, of her habitation, her occupation, or her final destiny? Was she really gone for ever, as Mr. Warrington would have assured me, resolved, body and spirit, into the dust out of which she had been made, and as effectually lost as the burnt-out candle, the particles of which have mingled with the air? Was there no place of meeting beyond this world where I should see and clasp her again? The parson would, of course, have answered 'yes;' but the attainment of his conventional paradise was saddled with so many conditions that I was hopeless of ever reaching it. *She* might have got there, with her angelic love and tenderness for all things, whether in heaven or on earth, but I knew myself to be unequal to following her footsteps. I sat on her grave stunned and hopeless. We had often talked of a future world together, and it had

seemed easy to believe anything when her lips uttered it ; but now that she had left me, I wanted *proof*, certain and unanswerable proof, of the truth of what I had been taught ; and the foundation on which I had built my apparent trust had all crumbled under my touchstone like sand. I felt there was no proof, no certainty, only a vague hope for ourselves, which became a broken reed when we tried to find comfort in it under the loss of those we had loved. Every one had conjured me to look forward to meeting her again. No one had given me one convincing argument that I should do so. I was surrounded by the dark, impenetrable mystery of death, and I got up from the grave and walked back to my lodgings in a condition of dull, sodden despair.

I was to meet Mr. Warrington the next morning, at twelve o'clock, at one of the large London wharves. He had been very

anxious to accompany me to St. Pucelle, and deliver me safely into Mr. Lovett's charge, but I had refused his kind offices. In the first place, I was quite able to travel alone ; in the second, I longed to find myself so. I had merely to cross to Antwerp, and take the train on from there to St. Pucelle—or rather to Artois, which was the nearest railway-station to it. I was sufficiently acquainted with the French language not to have the slightest doubt of being able to make my wants understood, and something struck me as very ludicrous in the idea of a little dandy like Mr. Warrington conducting a great, tall woman like myself across the water, and delivering me over to Mr. Lovett's care, as if I had been a child. So, after he had met me at the wharf, looking as fresh and trim, with an exquisite button-hole of white rosebuds and forget-me-nots, as if he were just about to take a stroll in the Park,

and secured a berth for me, and paid my fare, and seen that my luggage was safely on board, I dismissed him with ungrateful alacrity, and felt a sensation of relief as the steamboat quietly glided down the river, and I saw him take off his hat to me for at least the sixth time, before he quitted the landing-stage.

‘At last,’ I said to myself, with a long-drawn sigh, ‘I am free to forget. Everything about me—even to the dress I wear—is a novelty. I have positively nothing, except a piece of pasteboard and a book, that belongs to the past. Thank God for it!’

I forgot the heart I carried in my bosom. For a while I diverted myself by watching my fellow-passengers and trying to guess their histories. There were only about a dozen of them, and they were all collected upon deck. There was the conventional

newly-married couple ; I found them out at once, principally because everything the bride had on was new, even to the soles of her boots, which were almost as fresh as when they had left the workman's hands, and had evidently never trod the vulgar earth before that morning.

There were a mother and father with a couple of odious children, whom they permitted to run against the other passengers just as they chose, smearing their dresses with their sticky fingers and staring rudely in their faces for five minutes together. They kept leaping up on the seats also, and leaning over the sides of the vessel, till I began to hope that one or both might disappear for ever under the water. No such good luck, however, was in store for us. To the end of the voyage the children were ubiquitous. They scrambled for food at the dinner-table, and long after they had been put to bed,



reappeared in their night-dresses to demand more fruit and biscuits.

If parents only would realise what an abominable nuisance their offspring are to everybody but themselves, they would not, perhaps, entail so many unnecessary invectives on their heads as they do. If there is one character in history with whom I have more sympathy than another, it certainly is Herod. My attention was diverted for a time from these horrid imps by a young girl dressed, as I was, in deep mourning, who sat by herself in a very subdued attitude at one end of the vessel. I found she was going, for the first time, to a foreign school at Ghent. She had lost her father, and was anxious to perfect herself in French and German, before attempting to earn her own livelihood as a governess. It was a melancholy prospect, I thought. I imagined myself the governess of two such children as were annoying the

company now, whilst their mother complacently read a cheap novel, and felt sure that in such a case I should have ended my career upon the gallows. Had it been necessary for me to work for my bread, I would have been a housemaid, a cook, shop-girl—anything rather than a governess or a nurse!

Two or three foreigners, seedy and dirty in appearance, were standing near me, and looking rather impertinently in my face, which gave me a desire to change my seat. I rose, with the intention of crossing the deck, when my hand-bag, which had been lying on my lap, fell to the ground.

Some one quickly picked it up and restored it to me. Not one of my seedy foreigners, but a bright-haired English lad of not more, I thought, than sixteen or seventeen years old.

‘Do you wish to go downstairs?’ he inquired politely; ‘and may I help you?’

It was such a nice, frank, boyish voice and face, that I quite took to him.

‘No, thank you,’ I said; ‘I only wish to sit on the other side of the boat.’

‘I will find you a seat. It is much cooler there,’ he answered, with alacrity.

My boy-gallant then accompanied me across the deck, and having arranged my plaid for me to sit down upon, ensconced himself by my side.

‘We shall have a charming passage across this time,’ he remarked, confidentially.

‘Shall we? I know nothing of the tides. I have never crossed before.’

‘Do you go by Calais, then?’

‘No! This is the first time I have ever left England!’

He opened his round eyes to their utmost.

‘Oh! I say! Why, I cross six times every year, and sometimes oftener.’

‘Do you live abroad, then?’

‘No! I live in London—at least, my dad does—but I’m coaching for the Civil Service, with old Felton, at Rille, and run home at Christmas and Easter and Midsummer. I’m just going back after the summer vacation. Isn’t it a bore?’

‘Dreadful!’ I acquiesced. ‘But is not Rille near Artois?’

‘About twenty miles distant. Why?’

‘Only that I am going to Artois, or near it.’

‘That’s jolly! I’ll look after you and see you get there all right, as you’ve not been used to travelling—that is, if you’d like me to.’

‘Thank you, very much.’

I could not help inwardly smiling to think that I, who had so scornfully rejected the escort of the polite and experienced Mr. Warrington, should be thanking a raw school-boy for the offer of his valuable protection to Rille. But the cordial unconventionality of

the lad pleased me, and I thought I should like to have him for a travelling companion.

‘It is not much of a journey from Antwerp to Rille,’ I said.

‘Only a couple of hours. We shall get in about eight o’clock to-morrow morning, and there’s a train at half-past which will land me at my shop by half-past ten, and you at Artois at eleven. I pity you staying at Artois ; it’s a horrid dull place.’

‘Oh ! I am not going to remain at Artois. My friends live a little farther on.’

As he saw I did not volunteer the information, his intuitive delicacy forbid his asking me the name of my friends, or of myself. But he frankly disclosed his own.

‘My dad’s name is Sir John Stephenson. Dare say you’ve heard of him. He’s a big-wig in the doctor way. He wanted me to be one. He said, “Fred, my boy, there’s nothing like the medical profession.” But I

didn't see it—I don't fancy cutting off arms and legs—should you ?'

'No, indeed! And so your name is Frederick Stephenson ?'

'Yes! And I've got two brothers, Bob and Ernest; but they're quite little chaps.'

'I suppose I must tell you my name in return, especially as we shall travel to Rille together. I am called Hilda Marsh.'

'That's an awfully jolly name—Hilda, I mean. I've got three sisters, and they have rather nice names, I think: Jessie and Amy and Blanche, but "Hilda" beats them all to smash.'

'I am glad you think so! Do you like living at Rille ?'

'Pretty well, but I shall be very glad when I've done with it. We have larks now and then, but old Felton's the clergyman there, and awfully stiff with us. He hardly ever lets us go into the town.'

At this juncture the dinner-bell rang, and my young friend was all alert to obey it.

‘Won’t you come down?’ he urged. ‘They give very good spreads on board this boat, and if you’re likely to be ill when we get out to sea, you’ll be all the worse for not having eaten anything.’

But I could not join them at the dinner-table. I had not sat down to a regular meal for weeks, and the idea of roast and boiled joints sickened me. I persuaded Master Fred Stephenson to leave me where I was, whilst he satisfied the cravings of nature, to look at the charming sights which presented themselves on either side the river, which we were now fast leaving for the open sea.

By six o’clock we were well out in the ocean, which was calm as a lake at that time of year ; and I shrank with dismay at the idea of quitting the cool sweet-smelling deck for

the stuffy cabin, to which I had been introduced in the former part of the day.

‘Why should you?’ exclaimed Master Fred, to whom I had confided my grievance; ‘we’ll have a mattress and pillow sent up on deck for you, and you’ll sleep twice as well here as you would below. I’ll go and speak to the captain at once about it.’

He strode off with the air of a man, before I had time to dissuade him from asking for what appeared to me an impossible indulgence. However, his application was speedily followed by the appearance of a seaman bearing the mattress, pillows, and blankets; and when I saw several others of the passengers making themselves comfortable for the night in the same manner, I grew less shy of using my improvised couch, and was thankful to rest upon it.

As I lay there through the dark night, gazing up into the faces of the moon and the



stars, I could hardly believe that every throb of the machinery was carrying me farther and farther away from the scenes with which I had been associated so long. It was a lonely, peaceful sensation, that of being borne along upon the lapping waves and through the cool night air without any exertion, and only the burr of the steamer's wheels, and an occasional order from the captain to intimate that some one was watching over my safety whether I slept or not. I lay thus for some hours, thinking the one great thought that never left my brain then, by night or day, until at last fatigue overcame me, and I fell asleep. I woke with a sensation of being stifled. There was no light, no air, nothing. What had happened to me? I struggled violently for a moment, when some one, with a gay laugh, suddenly twitched a blanket off my face, and I was free to breathe again.

‘Holloa! Miss Marsh,’ exclaimed Fred

Stephenson, 'did you think you were buried alive?'

'Something very like it,' I replied; 'what happened to me?'

'Only this, that when the dew began to fall this morning, I drew the blanket over your face. It isn't safe to sleep in it, you know, and every one is covered up in the same way.'

'Well, it was very kind of you to think of it,' I said, 'but I certainly thought we were all going to the bottom. How still the sea is!'

'We've been out of the sea for the last four hours. We are going up the Scheldt now, and shall be in Antwerp before you've had time to have your breakfast and make a comfortable toilet.'

I scrambled to my feet at this intelligence, and sought the shelter of my cabin, which felt closer and more stuffy even than it had

done the day before. A cup of coffee woke me completely up again, and by the time the boat steamed alongside the quay at Antwerp, I was on deck, ready to admire or be surprised at every fresh thing I saw. Master Fred Stephenson proved an admirable cicerone, and never ceased to call my attention to everything that he thought would interest or amuse me.

‘Aren’t those rum houses and trees?’ he said in his schoolboy language, as he pointed out some quaint buildings on the quay; ‘they look for all the world like the contents of one of those German boxes of toys the children get at home, set up on end. And that’s a milk-cart drawn by that dog, with all those brass cans in it. Did you ever see such caps and bonnets as the women wear. I tried to squash one of their bonnets once by sitting on it, but it was no use. They’re as hard as wood. Holloa! here come the Custom-house

people to look at the boxes. If you will let me have your keys, Miss Marsh, I'll see your luggage passed. I suppose you've got nothing to declare.'

I assured him I had not.

'Well, I've got lots, but I'm blessed if they shall find them. I smuggle more things, every time I cross, than the rest of the English pupils put together ; but I'm an awfully lucky fellow, and have never been caught yet.'

I stood on the bridge to watch the Custom-house officers at their duty, and found it a very amusing sight. The distinction they made between searching the luggage of their own countrymen and that of mine, inspired me with a feeling of pride that, notwithstanding Master Fred's peccadilloes, the word of an Englishman should be so readily taken.

I observed that when the bridegroom and the father of the obnoxious children had simply said they had nothing in their boxes

liable to duty, the keys were returned to them after the merest feint had been made of raising the lids. But no such declarations availed the seedy foreigners, though they accompanied them with oaths. Their scanty apparel, very yellow and shabby in appearance, was religiously displayed on deck for the admiration of the rest of the passengers, and every crevice of their trunks carefully searched ; and I felt sincere pity for one poor wretch who was compelled to turn out the whole contents of an enormous hamper, which was found, after all, to contain nothing but apples and pears.

When it came to the turn for Master Fred's boxes, he threw his keys to the Custom-house officers in the most nonchalant manner, desiring him to search for himself.

The consequence of which was that, the trouble promising to prove too great, the

keys were merely turned in the locks and delivered again to their owner.

‘That’s the way I do them, Miss Marsh,’ said Master Fred, with the greatest glee, as we drove together to the station. ‘There’s nothing goes down in this world like a perfect absence of fear. If you try to prevent those fellows from rumpling your collars, they turn everything over in order to find your contraband goods ; but if you tell them to look for themselves and not bother you, they feel sure directly that innocence alone can make you so brave.’

‘You are a very naughty boy,’ I said, smiling in spite of myself at his self-assurance and British cheek.



## CHAPTER IV.

ST. PUCELLE.

BUT notwithstanding his youth, I found Master Fred Stephenson not only entertaining, but useful, for he took all trouble off my hands, and before long I found myself sitting by his side in a *coupé*, and travelling fast towards Rille and Artois. He rattled on, in his boyish manner, of his school-life and pursuits, mingling his discourse with more than one tale of scandal concerning the English abroad.

‘You should not repeat such stories young

man,' I said reprovngly, 'whether they are true or not.'

'Oh ! they deserve everything one can say of them, Miss Marsh. You never saw such a lot—greedy, grasping, ill-natured, and tale-bearing. They seem to live only to cheat each other and pick holes in their neighbours' characters. I am generally ashamed to meet any of my countrymen on the Continent. And the way they dress, too ! I wonder, for my part, that any of the tradesmen trust them. Now there's an old card who's a great chum of Felton's—to see him and hear him talk, you'd think he was a perfect saint ; but just listen to the tales that are told of his being in debt all over the place, and fleecing young men out of their money ! Oh ! criminy !'

'Perhaps they are not all true,' I suggested mildly, for as we neared my destination I began to feel rather nervous at the prospect of meeting my unknown friends, and less



well disposed to listen to the social scandal Master Stephenson amused himself by retailing to me. 'Were we not rather late in starting? It is nearly half-past ten now, and we are several stations yet from Rille. I wonder if Mr. Lovett has received my letter to say I should start yesterday.'

'Mr.—*who?*' exclaimed Fred Stephenson.

'Mr. Lovett, the Protestant minister of St. Pucelle. He is my trustee, and a sort of guardian. It is at his house that I am going to stay.'

'Well, I *am* blowed!' ejaculated my elegant young friend.

'Do you know him, then?'

'*Know him!* Of course I do! Everybody knows him within fifty miles of Artois. He was tutor, or guardian, or something of the kind, to the young German Prince Francius von Rudelstein de Ritzburg, and spends half his time at court. He is consi-

dered quite a swell in his way, and is often over at Rille. And so you're going to St. Pucelle ! What a lark !

I could not exactly see in what the 'lark' consisted ; but I thought it a singular coincidence that my young travelling companion should be acquainted with Mr. Lovett.

'Perhaps you will be surprised to hear that I have never seen him yet. What is he like ?'

'Oh, a very fine-looking old fellow, with snow-white hair and the most benevolent of countenances. He's got two jolly daughters, too.'

'I am glad to hear that, because I am likely to see much more of them than of their father. What are their ages ?'

'I can't tell you that, because I'm not sure ; but I should think the eldest must be about your age, and her sister a few years younger. They're both pretty ; Tessie has fair hair

and a nice tall figure, but the little one's darker.'

'Have you seen much of them?'

'No; very little; only when they came to Rille with their father, to be confirmed. But, by Jove! here's the old shop itself. I'm so awfully sorry I can't see you safe to Artois, Miss Marsh, but it's only three stations farther on, and the diligence will be in waiting to take you on to St. Pucelle. Good-bye! I'm so glad I met you! Hope we shall soon meet again! Shouldn't wonder if old Felton lets me run over to Piron for a day's shooting this autumn. No; no thanks. I'm so glad I was able to do anything for you!' And, with a wave of his hat and many smiles, the nice, frank-hearted boy ran away to greet a group of his schoolfellows, who were assembled on the platform. The last I saw of his happy face, as the train moved slowly out of the station, was a succession of nods; the

last I heard of his joyous voice, a hearty  
'*Au revoir*.

Well, he had been much comfort to me on my first essay at traversing the world alone, and I was thankful I had encountered him. Now he was gone, and I turned my thoughts entirely to the meeting which lay so short a way ahead of me.

When I arrived at Artois, I found, as he had told me, a diligence in waiting to take all passengers and luggage on to St. Pucelle. This conveyance, so fast becoming extinct upon the Continent, excited much of my interest. It is true that it had no springs, and jolted along the rough country-road to such an extent as nearly to jolt me into pieces; true, that the four little mules that drew it, decorated with scarlet woollen tassels and jingling with bells, required a constant succession of oaths and cracks of the whip to make them move out of a walk, and often stopped dead

of their own accord, notwithstanding their driver's energy. I was wedged in tightly, also, on a broiling August morning, between some fat market-women, who regarded my foreign appearance with curious wonder, and, opposite, a set of men who puffed smoke in my face with the utmost nonchalance. But the diligence was making its slow, uneven way on a road cut in the side of a hill. On one hand lay the lovely fertile valley of Artois, through the green bosom of which a river was winding its way like a silver snake, glistening in the sunlight. On the other was a high hill, which looked almost like a mountain in my inexperienced eyes, and was covered to the top with purple heather, precisely similar to that we find in England and Scotland, intermingled with wild flowers of every form and colour. I was wrapt in admiration of the view. I gazed from right to left in silent wonder, thinking I had never

seen anything in my life before so beautiful and bright, and forgetful alike of the uncomfortable pressure I was enduring from my stout neighbours, and the vile tobacco-smoke which came puffing in my face from over the way. Subsequent experience made me aware that the journey from Artois to St. Pucelle, when performed in the diligence, occupied an hour and a quarter; but it did not seem to have been half that time to me when the vehicle suddenly came to a standstill, and I heard a voice in parley with the driver.

The fat women looked at each other and murmured something about the '*Curé Anglais*;' and my curiosity was just being awakened by a few words of French which I had caught from outside, when an old gentleman came round to the diligence-door and looked in upon us.

'*Bonjour, monsieur !*' cried all its occupants, save one, simultaneously; and the

new-comer raised his hat in reply to the general salutation. I thought I had never seen such a perfect picture of an old man before. His snow-white hair covered his finely-formed head in loose, wavy curls ; his high forehead bore the impress of intellect and benevolence ; and his bright blue eyes beamed forth from a face the complexion of which was soft and fair as that of a child. He had a tall, upright figure, rather stout than otherwise, and must have been, in his youth, an unusually handsome man. His long cloth coat and broad-brimmed hat told me his profession before he spoke, and I was delighted when I heard him demand, in English, if I were Miss Marsh.

‘Am I speaking to Mr. Lovett?’ I exclaimed.

‘Yes, my dear, yes ; no other. Your letter reached us safely this morning, so I thought I would walk a little way down the road to

meet the diligence. I hope you have travelled here comfortably ?

‘ Very comfortably, thank you. But are we so short a distance, then, from St. Pucelle ?’

‘ We are within a stone’s throw of the town. There it stands, on the brow of the hill.’

‘ I should very much like then, if I may, Mr. Lovett, to walk back with you instead of driving.’

‘ By all means, my dear,’ he replied, as he opened the door and helped me out of the vehicle.

A few words in French explained matters to the driver, and in another minute the diligence was lost to view in a cloud of white dust, and the Rev. Horace Lovett and I were left standing alone on the road to St Pucelle. The first thing he did was to take my hand, and regard me steadfastly in the face.



‘You are *very* like your poor father,’ he said, ‘both in feature and expression, and you will be all the dearer to me for the resemblance. Perhaps you have heard—you may have been told—what firm, fast friends we were in the olden days.’

‘Oh yes, Mr. Lovett ; my mother has often told me so.’

‘I did not know your poor mother,’ he replied ; ‘I was settled here before your father’s marriage. But report has told me how good and amiable a wife he had gained in her.’

‘She was indeed good,’ I said falteringly. ‘I seem to have lost everything I possessed in losing her.’

‘Come, come, my child,’ he said soothingly, ‘I should not have mentioned the subject to you so soon. Do not let us speak of it to-day. You have come to the house of your father’s earliest and closest friend. You must

try and think that it is a second father himself who welcomes you there.'

'Indeed you are very good to me,' I replied; 'and I felt the kindness of your offer from the first, though I have scarcely thanked you for it.'

'You have thanked me in the best way possible, my dear, by accepting it. I have had two daughters hitherto; now I shall have three. My little girls are all impatience to form your acquaintance; but you must make allowances for them. You will find them rough little Wallons, who know nothing of England or English customs.'

'What is a Wallon, Mr. Lovett? I am afraid you will find me as ignorant of Continental ways and fashions as your girls are of English.'

'Then you must teach each other. We are in what they call here the Wallon country, my dear, which they would term in Scot

land, I think, "neither fish, flesh, nor good red herrin'." The people hereabout speak a *patois* of French and German, rather difficult of comprehension at first, and which has considerably spoilt my little girls' accent.

We were now approaching the entrance of the town, which consisted principally of one long street built on a steep hill, so that to mount it almost seemed like climbing up stairs, especially as it was paved irregularly with grey rough stone. At the very summit of it stood an imposing-looking edifice built of granite, with a spire and cross lifted to the skies, which I concluded to be the church of which Mr. Lovett had charge. But he soon undeceived me.

'Oh no, my dear ; you must not expect to see our faith honoured after that fashion in this country. That is the Catholic church, under the superintendence of my very good friend, the Abbé Morteville. I have offered

to exchange with him more than once, but he has not taken the hint.'

'I should hardly have thought there had been sufficient Protestants in a town like this to render it worth while to keep up a church and minister for them.'

'No more there are. But my excellent friend and patron, the Grand Duke Francius von Rudelstein,' interested himself on my behalf, and placed me here in order to attend to the spiritual wants of the summer visitors. We have a great many visitors to St. Pucelle in the summer season.'

'I don't wonder at it. It seems to me the loveliest place I have ever seen.'

At this juncture, a man dressed in a blue blouse, buckled round his waist, and a cap with a peak to it, ran out of a shop and button-holed Mr. Lovett, whilst he apparently pleaded for something, very volubly and earnestly, in his own language.

‘Some parochial confidence,’ I thought, as I saw my old friend move farther from my side, so as to take the man out of earshot. They spoke together for some minutes ; the tradesman still pleading, and Mr. Lovett seeming to try and soothe him down to a quieter frame of mind. At last he prevailed. The man in the blouse smiled and raised his peaked cap, and Mr. Lovett, calling out cheerily, ‘*À demain,*’ returned his smile in the most benevolent manner, and hastened to my side again.

‘You will excuse me, my dear,’ he said, ‘but a minister is at the beck and call of all his parishioners.’

‘Is that man a Protestant, then ?’ I asked with surprise.

I do not know why I should have been surprised, but he had looked so thoroughly unlike it.

‘We have a regular mixture here,’ replied

Mr. Lovett, without answering my question. ‘Do you see that house on the right hand, my dear child, with steps leading up either side to the porch? that is my humble abode, and that is where I hope you will make yourself very happy for a long time to come.’

I followed the direction of his silver-headed cane with a quick curiosity that the appearance of the house was well calculated to increase. It was built of wood, and looked to me more like the representations I had seen of Swiss *châlets* than any other sort of private dwelling. The principal door was reached, as Mr. Lovett had pointed out to me, by a double flight of wooden steps, with rails on the outer side of them. The windows were lattices, with diamond-shaped panes of glass. The house looked large and commodious, but it was so much built on a slope that the garden to one side of it was level with

the windows of the first story ; so that the lower rooms must consequently have been, in part at least, under ground. The front was covered with a luxuriant union of vine, fig and pear tree, and the little garden to the side, which was visible above the top of the wall, was a mass of fragrant bloom. But what attracted me most was the figure of a girl, leaning over the rails which guarded the porch.

Her features did not strike me at first sight as being pretty, but there was a grace about her figure, and a sweet, fair womanliness in her face, that made me feel at once we should be friends.

‘Papa!’ she called out, with a decidedly French pronunciation, as we drew near the porch.

Mr. Lovett looked up and shook his stick gaily at her.

‘There is my Tessie,’ he said proudly,

‘the elder of the two ; and as good a child as ever walked alone ! And where is my little maid ?’ he continued to his daughter ; ‘has she run away to hide herself, in fear of this formidable stranger ?’

‘No, no, papa !’ replied Tessie, laughing. ‘Ange has gone up the hill to fetch some eggs from Mère Fromard. For we did not expect Miss Marsh would arrive so soon.’

I thought she was a daughter for any man to be proud of, as she came gracefully down the steps to meet me, and extended her hand in greeting. She was tall and slight, and clothed in a black stuff dress, with a broad white muslin apron on, fashioned with a bib that was pinned on either shoulder. Her fair, soft hair was taken loosely off her face and coiled in a knot behind her head, and her grey eyes—too small and too grey to be like her father’s—beamed forth mildly from a complexion that was unusually delicate for



a country-bred girl. But what struck me most in Teresa Lovett's face was the unmistakable look which betrayed that she had suffered—and seen others suffer—as I had. It was a bond of union between us that was cemented the first day we met, and will last until time is no more.

‘Come, girls! kiss each other!’ cried Mr. Lovett, as he watched the commonplace greeting with which we timidly touched each other's hand. ‘That's right,’ he continued, as we obeyed his directions; ‘you must never forget that your fathers were more like brothers than friends in the olden time. God bless my soul! it's many a scrape I got in with Dick Marsh in our college days; and many a time we've hoped we should live to meet again, and have a crack over the past. But that wish has been overruled, so we must make the best of what remains to us. But if you girls don't get on together, I shall

never forgive you. You are both motherless, and you've only got one father left between the lot of you ; so it will be very hard if you can't cling together and make the rest of your lives as pleasant as may be.'

'We mean to try to do so, dear papa,' said Tessie in her soft voice, as she gave me a second embrace, preparatory to leading me into the house. 'I am sure you must be tired,' she continued ; 'do come in and rest.'

All this had taken place in front of the house, and in the very centre of the street ; but then the street of St. Pucelle must not be judged by the rules of any other. It was just past noon. The inhabitants of the town were unanimously partaking of their mid-day meal.

Not a passenger was to be seen from one end of the long thoroughfare to the other, and doubtless my new friends and I

might have embraced for the next half-hour without observation. But I was beginning to feel very weary, and was glad to accept Tessie's invitation to enter and rest myself. My slumbers on board the boat had been but broken ones, and the fatigue of the excitement consequent on my journey was beginning to make itself apparent. So that I felt thankful when I had mounted the wooden steps which led to the hall-door, and realised that, for the time being, I had reached the end of my travels.

The door opened immediately upon a large room, the floor of which was but half covered by a threadbare carpet, in which it was impossible to trace even the remains of colour ; in the centre stood a deal table with a faded green cloth, round which were placed some half-dozen or more rush-bottomed chairs. A large oil painting of the Crucifixion hung over the narrow, wooden mantelpiece, and was the

only visible ornament. And a buffet covered with wine-glasses and tumblers stood to one side of the apartment, which I concluded to be the dining-room. I confess, though, that I was hardly prepared for the meagre appearance of its furniture, and I suppose Tessie guessed my surprise from the expression of my face.

‘You must not expect to find all the customs of this country similar to those of England,’ she said, with a touch of pride. ‘Papa tells me you think a great deal of your furniture and rooms there, but no one does so in St. Pucelle. In the first place, there are so few people here to see and admire it; and in the second, the servants would not know how to keep it in order. Not that we have always been so shabby as we are now,’ she added, in a lower voice; ‘but Ange and I were only babies when poor mamma died, and there has been no one to look after such

things since. We don't care for ourselves—Ange and I—we would as soon sit on rush-bottomed chairs as on velvet ; but it is sad for poor papa, who has been used to such a different life from this.'



## CHAPTER V.

ANGE.

‘ANGE is your sister’s name, is it not?’ I asked her.

‘Yes. And you will like her so much. She is such a darling! She was baptised ‘Angela,’ but we have always called her Ange for short. The country people gave it to her first. She was so pretty, like a little angel, running amongst them with her golden curls, and they named her ‘*Petite Ange!*’ And then we took it up, and she has been called so ever since.’

‘It is a very pretty abbreviation! Is there much difference in your ages?’

‘Five years. I am three-and-twenty, and she is but just eighteen. Am I younger than you?’

‘By a twelvemonth only. I hope we shall be very good friends, Tessie—if I may call you so.’

‘Yes, indeed you must; and I must call you by your name—Hilda—since papa says we are to be sisters. But if you should find the life here too dull and stupid after England! That would be very sad for all of us, would it not?’

‘Why should you anticipate it? I have not been accustomed to a gay life, Tessie. I lived all alone with my dear mother until—until——’

‘Yes, yes, I know!’ cried the girl, with ready sympathy.

‘And, as you may imagine, I am hardly

likely to wish to mix in scenes of gaiety now. All I want is rest and peace.'

'Shall we ever get it in this life?' inquired Tessie, in a low voice.

I looked up at her in astonishment.

'I mean—I mean—' she went on confusedly, 'that I am not going to let you stand here any longer. Come and see the bedroom I have prepared for you.'

For we were still lingering in the barely-furnished dining-room by which we had entered the house. She led me through a second apartment, smaller than the first, but bearing more signs of occupation, having an old piano in one corner, a case of books in another, and a cage of canary birds singing loudly in the window. Then, to my astonishment, we entered a large stone kitchen, from which a flight of stairs led up to the bedroom floor. At the table in the centre sat an old Frenchwoman, shredding potatoes



into a wooden bowl ; but whether she was a servant or not I felt puzzled to decide. She wore a stuff gown, as good as Tessie's, with a scarlet worsted shawl, notwithstanding the heat, pinned tightly across her bosom, and a net-cap much ornamented with artificial flowers and ribbons, such as is never assumed by the lower classes in Belgium except on Sundays and fête days.

She did not look up, either, as we entered the kitchen, nor show any sign of noticing our presence until Tessie addressed her, as I thought, with some timidity.

‘This is Miss Marsh, Madame ; she has just arrived by the diligence, and I am about to take her up to her bedroom that she may refresh herself before luncheon.’

‘Very good ! You know your way there,’ muttered the woman in French, going on with her occupation.

‘We generally have our luncheon about this

time,' said Tessie to me, 'but if you would like to take any refreshment beforehand——'

'What refreshment would you offer her, unless it be an apple and a glass of sour beer?' interrupted the potato-shredder, who appeared to understand English perfectly, although she spoke in French.

'Oh, Madame! we can surely find Miss Marsh a roll and a little butter,' replied Tessie, with a nervous laugh; but I assured her that I should need nothing until the family meal was announced.

I heard the Frenchwoman grumbling to herself as we ascended the stairs, and trusted that a close association with her would not form a necessary part of my new life.

'Madame Marmoret is not very genial with strangers,' remarked Tessie, as we entered a long bare corridor upon which the doors of the bedchambers opened.

'Is she your housekeeper?' I inquired

‘She is our everything. She nursed me and Ange when we were babies, and has reared us ever since. She is the cook and the housemaid and the footman and the butler all in one. But she is a shocking tyrant, and Ange and I hardly dare call our souls our own when she says that we shall not.’

‘Why don’t you get rid of her, then?’

Tessie’s eyes opened to their fullest extent.

‘Get rid of Madame Marmoret! We should almost as soon think of getting rid of papa. Oh, no! we shall never get rid of her, as long as we live. She is an “institution.” She wouldn’t go even if we asked her. She would turn us all out of the house first.’

To me, who possessed a strongly conservative spirit, and had no idea of permitting my inferiors to take a liberty with me, Tessie’s mode of talking about Madame Mar-

moret appeared only as excellent satire. I was yet to learn that it was sad and sober truth. But we had arrived at my bed-chamber, and though I was a little disappointed at its want of size, all the bulk of the house seeming to be monopolised by passages and staircases, I could not help observing with gratitude the evident care that had been bestowed on the arrangement of the little white bed, and the muslin curtain that draped the window, and was touched beyond measure at the discovery of a small blue silk pincushion on the toilet-table, ready filled with pins, with 'Hilda' worked across the front of it in white beads.

'Ange did that,' said Tessie, delighted with my pleasure at the sight; 'she was making that all last week, especially for your table. She wanted to work a little cross beneath your name, but I would not allow her. I thought you might not like it.'

‘Why not?’

‘Because the English, as a rule, are so superstitious. They are afraid of a cross. One would think it portended evil. But Ange is so good—so pious! She would live in the church, if it were possible.’

‘Is your church far from here?’

‘Ah! I did not mean our church—I meant that of our good friend, Monsieur Morteville. No, it is not far off—it is just over the way. But it is not a church at all. It is only a room.’

My face fell. I had always greatly enjoyed the services of religion, especially where well conducted, and I felt I should need the comfort of them more than ever now.

There had been something in Mr. Lovett’s manner and appearance—I know not why—that had led me to hope that I should derive

much solace from being under his care. I suppose it was the look of extra refinement that had misled me. But Tessie's description of their place of worship was very discouraging.

‘Only a room!’ I echoed, in a tone of disappointment.

‘Yes, and such an ugly one! It is a schoolroom on week-days, and we have to sit on the dirty benches that the children use. I play the harmonium, and Ange leads the hymns, but it is sorry work. It will be better now you have come. I hope you will sing with us. Papa is grand, of course. He is grand whatever he does, or wherever you put him; but it makes me sad to see him thrown away in such a horrid place. I always feel he ought to be preaching in a splendid cathedral like St. Gudule, at Brussels. He looks altogether out of place with whitewashed walls.’

‘St. Paul, in the upper room at Athens,’ I said, smiling.

‘Ah! St. Paul was never half such a man as our father. He ought to be Archbishop of Canterbury at the very least, or, as Ange says, Pope of Rome!’

‘He is certainly a very fine-looking old gentleman,’ I acquiesced.

‘Do you think he looks *old*?’ said Tessie. ‘He never seems to grow old, to Ange and me. It would be a dreadful thing to wake up some day and find that papa had really changed into an old gentleman.’

I could not say he looked young, and so I discreetly held my tongue. I had not quite completed my toilette when a bell was heard to tinkle.

‘I must go!’ cried Tessie. ‘That is Madame ringing the bell for me to lay the table for *gouter*. You see, Ange and I are obliged to help her in these little matters, or

she could not get through her work. Do you think you can find your way downstairs again, Hilda, without me ?'

'I am sure I can,' I answered ; and in a few minutes more I proved my words by following her through the kitchen to the apartment which held the piano. There I found her busily employed in laying the luncheon-table, and singing a little French song as she worked.

The repast was a very simple one, but it looked inviting. There was a loaf of rye bread, a country cheese, a large basket of rosy apples, a bowl of custard, and a plate of *gaufres*, which Tessie told me she had made herself. Everything was beautifully clean, but there was evidence of strict economy, if not of poverty, in the arrangements, which, remembering what I had been told of the Reverend Horace Lovett's grand patrons and connection with court, rather surprised



me. However, I was no gourmand, and did not give a second thought to the matter. As soon as the *goutter* was prepared, Madame Marmoret went out at the front door and rang a handbell violently on the balcony, which was shortly followed by the sound of her master's voice and footsteps as he obeyed the signal to return home.

‘There is papa!’ exclaimed Tessie, ‘and there—yes! there comes Ange with him! I thought she could not be much longer. They must have met in the street.’

At this moment Mr. Lovett, his face beaming with kindly benevolence, appeared on the threshold of the room we sat in, dragging a girl after him by both her hands held in one of his.

‘Here she is,’ he said; ‘here’s my little maid, Hilda. I found her hiding somewhere away in the cow-house, afraid to show her face indoors for fear you would bite her nose

off; and I believe she would have stayed there till to-morrow morning if I had not chanced to come across her.'

'No, no, papa! indeed,' remonstrated Ange, with the same foreign accent I had observed in her sister, 'you are not just to me. I am not afraid: I was only going round to give the eggs to Madame, and take off my hat before presenting myself to Mademoiselle Marsh.'

He swung the girl in front of him, and nearly pushed her into my arms.

'Go and present yourself to Mademoiselle Marsh, then,' he said, mimicking her pronunciation.

As she stood before me, with her heightened colour and a deprecating look upon her face, I thought I had never seen such a pretty creature before as Mr. Lovett's 'little maid.' She was dressed in black serge, like her sister, and had a white muslin pelerine crossed

quaintly over her bosom ; a straw hat, with a black ribbon tied round it, and a wide flapping brim that almost hid her features, formed her head-dress, and a plain silver cross, depending from her throat, was her only ornament. But how shall I ever describe her face ! that mobile face, the expression of which changed every second, like a restless sea that never can keep still ; and that delicate variable bloom, that rose and fell in crimson waves with every emotion that passed through her sensitive little brain ! In actual appearance she was very like the old man, which accounted for his evident pride in her. She had his rich blue eyes, with long dark lashes and well-marked eyebrows : the chestnut hair—which I afterwards learned he had also possessed when young—with a natural wave in it like his, that kept it rippling low on her brow and the nape of her neck and round about her ears in little sunny curls. The tip of her

pretty nose was just sufficiently tilted to redeem it from being aquiline, and her laughing mouth, displaying a row of firm white teeth, was childlike in its dewy rose-leaf bloom.

I am not given to falling into raptures over the perfections of my own sex: few women are, in this century of pearl powder, belladonna, rouge and auricomus. But it was just because I had detected and been disgusted at such falsehoods, that I gazed at Angela Lovett as at something that I had never seen before. She looked as if she had but just stepped down, fresh made, from the hand of her Creator.

‘Oh, Ange!’ I exclaimed involuntarily, my admiration made patent by my voice, ‘I hope that you will like me!’

‘Like you—why, of course she will! what should she do else?’ replied her father, answering for her. ‘We must hear no more

of likes and dislikes after to-day, Hilda! Here are my three daughters, all ready to attend me at my *goutter*, and I mean to make no distinction between them henceforward. So now, my little maid, kiss your sister Hilda, and let us see if Madame has given us anything that my poor old teeth can manage to crack for luncheon.'

The old gentleman's kindness made me feel so completely at home, that when Ange blushing advanced to salute me, I opened my arms and pressed the girl to my heart as if she had indeed been my younger sister. I was not surprised, as we gathered round the table, to see that Tessie had slipped out of the room and returned with a basin of hot soup, which she placed before her father, whilst Ange silently rose and produced a small tin of rusks for him to eat with it. It was but right that the old man, whose digestion was probably impaired, should fare more

daintily than his young daughters, who could eat anything.

I resolved that, before the morrow came, I would ask Tessie to let me share in the labour of waiting on him and attending to his wants.

He was good enough to call me his daughter, and I would not take the name unless I were allowed to fulfil the service. So we girls eat rye bread and cheese and munched apples, whilst Mr. Lovett sipped his soup and sherry, and talked to us of the days before we were born, when he had been hand-in-glove with some of the highest and most celebrated names in England, until I wondered why he should have left a country which was reeking with patronage and interest for him, to bury himself abroad, even though it were as the tutor of a German prince. I could not venture, however, to put the question, although I did ask him if he had

not greatly missed the associates of whom he spoke on first leaving them.

‘Yes, my dear Hilda, you are right. I certainly did so, but my motto through life has been, *Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra*. It was duty that called me to this country; a hard and difficult duty it is true, but one which I could not have neglected without sacrificing what was dearer to me than pleasure—my sense of right!’

And Mr. Lovett struck his broad chest with an energy that raised him very considerably in my estimation. There is something so ennobling in the sight of a man who is strong enough to conquer inclination in the cause of his religion. His girls regarded the sentiment he had expressed with the same admiration that I did. I could see Ange’s blue eyes beaming upon him from the opposite side of the table, whilst Tessie’s looked tenderer than before. It was beauti-

ful to see their devotion to their father. How glad I was to find myself in a family who respected and loved each other, and were, moreover, so perfectly united.

On rising from the table, the girls asked me if I would accompany them in a walk, but the fatigue I had encountered since the day before was beginning to make itself palpably felt, and I decided to spend the afternoon in my own room, putting my wardrobe in order. Tessie offered to assist me, but I declined her services. After so much novelty and excitement, the idea of a few hours' rest and solitude was grateful to me. But when I got alone I found I was too tired even to think. I turned out the contents of my boxes into the wooden press that waited for them, and then I flung myself down upon the inviting-looking little bed and fell fast asleep.





## CHAPTER VI.

### TURKEY AND TRUFFLES.

I MUST have slept for several hours, when I was awakened by the sound of a shrill voice that reached me from the courtyard below. For my room was at the back of the house, and looked out on a little paved court that lay on the other side of the narrow garden, and led through a cow-shed into the main street again. So primitive was the mode of architecture and the idea of comfort in the town of St. Pucelle.

‘*Tiens !*’ the shrill voice was exclaiming

when my ears were suddenly made cognisant of its existence ; ‘ you are a fool—a pig, a *maladroit*, to fancy any such thing ! She will cost twice the money to keep that one of our girls do. Can we feed her on nettle soup and dandelion salad ? Will she eat rye bread every day, and be content with crust *potage* for her dinner ? And her presence here will make the town furious. We shall be beset by them ; they will say you have no right to increase your family ; and if you tell them the reason why, they will answer, “ Then give us justice,” and you will look like a fool—as you are !’

‘ But, my dear good Marmoret,’ replied a soft voice, which sounded wonderfully like that of my guardian, though I could not believe that it was he, you are mistaken ; I shall tell them nothing.’

‘ And you think I have four hands to work with, perhaps, and four feet on which to run

up and down these stairs from morning till night, that you bring me another person to cook for and clean after. Bah ! but it is you that will find yourself mistaken ! If justice is to be done to any one it begins with me, Marie Marmoret, who has slaved and toiled for the last twenty-two years without so much as a “thank you” for it.’

‘Is that quite true?’ demanded the same soft voice. ‘But you are not yourself to-day, my good Marmoret ; let us leave the discussion of these domestic matters until to-morrow.’

‘*Not myself!*’ echoed Madame, sharply ; ‘it is false. I am not myself when I cringe and smile and speak softly, and pretend to believe that which I know to be a lie ; but I am telling you my true mind now, and you can make what you please of it. I am getting tired—that is the truth—tired and

sick of it all ; and I know not why I should hold my tongue more than others.'

'Well, well ! I am about to see Dumont and Chrétien to-morrow, and they will believe what I say to them, if you do not.'

'And much good your seeing them will do them—poor fools ! They'd better by far come to me. I could give them a piece of advice worth two of yours.'

'Now, my dear good Marmoret,' said the other voice, 'I must entreat you to be reasonable. I can manage my own affairs perfectly well, and need no assistance. You must oblige me by not interfering.'

'Bah ! I have been "reasonable," as you call it, too long. If Dumont and Chrétien are to see you, I do so first. Have I not the prior claim ? Answer me that !'

'Certainly you have, and I always acknowledge it. But be patient, and your reward will come.'

‘ I should like to see it,’ grumbled Madame Marmoret, as she bustled into the house again.

Now the whole of this conversation, being carried on in voluble French, was not patent to my understanding ; but I could catch a word here and there, and it made me uneasy.

Madame Marmoret was evidently very angry, and her anger was chiefly directed against me. I was sure that the first part of her conversation alluded to my arrival at St. Pucelle, and her disgust at the prospect of having more work to do in consequence. It was annoying to think I had been the cause of a disturbance so soon ; but Madame Marmoret had judged me too hastily, and I had no doubt that when she knew more of me she would alter her opinion. I should never dream of entering a household with only one servant, without taking my share of its duties.

She thought, doubtless, that I was a fine English lady, accustomed to be waited on for everything, and unwilling to raise a hand to help myself. She would soon find out her mistake. I could dust and sweep and make beds perhaps as well as she could, and I had fully intended to join Tessie and Ange in their domestic avocations the very next morning.

But what puzzled me was to guess to whom Madame could possibly have been confiding her grievances. At first I had thought the voice was like that of Mr. Lovett, but when I heard the familiar way in which she addressed her companion, I knew at once that it could not be her master with whom she had been talking. And I was further convinced of the justice of my conclusion when a tap at my door was followed by the entrance of Ange to tell me that dinner would be ready in a few minutes.

‘We have been for such a long walk, Tessie and I,’ she said, as she took off her broad-brimmed hat and fanned her heated face with it; ‘right up the hill and as far as the forest. It was delightful when we got there! You would have enjoyed it, Hilda! The trees are so big and beautiful, and under them it is as cool and as shady as a church. And you and papa have been sleeping all the afternoon away. Lazy people!’

‘Has your papa been asleep also?’

‘Yes. We found him fast asleep in the big straw chair. I hid behind it, and tickled his nose with a branch of flowering lime until he woke. It was such fun to see his dear old head bobbing round to find out who it was. Most people would have been cross, you know, but papa is never cross about anything.’

‘Not with *you*, I expect,’ I said, smiling.

‘Nor with anybody, unless they have done

something very bad indeed. Papa is an angel; you will know that when you have stayed here a little while. He is a great deal too good for this world.'

'They say the best praise a man can have is that of his own household.'

'Then papa deserves the very best, for every one loves him—in the house and out of it—they couldn't help it. He is so good and holy. I should have no fear at all about getting into heaven if I were only sure I might keep hold of his skirts.'

'My dear, you shouldn't say that of any man.'

'I must say it of papa. I often think he is only half a man. He is so much more like some of those dear old saints whose lives Monsieur Morteville has lent me to read, and who were too holy to live with sinners upon earth. You will say the same in a few days, Hilda. But now it is dinner-



time, and we must go down, or we shall get a scolding.'

'Few gentlemen like being kept waiting for their dinner,' I observed.

'Oh, I didn't mean from papa; he never scolds. It is Madame who will be so angry if we are late. And as likely as not she will carry off the dishes again, and leave us without any dinner at all,' cried Ange, laughing, as she disappeared.

I did not consider it a laughing matter, and so I quickly arranged my toilet and hurried after her.

The meal was laid in the front room, I found, this time—the *salle*, as they familiarly termed it—and the family were already assembled there.

Mr. Lovett sat at the head of the table, looking like a veritable patriarch, with his table-napkin pinned to his breast, after the foreign fashion; the girls were on either side

of him, and I found I was expected to fill the seat of honour at the bottom.

‘As the eldest, my dear—as the eldest,’ he averred. ‘It is your proper place.’

Madame now appeared with a large covered dish, which she put before her master, and the contents of which, on being disclosed, proved to be a turkey stuffed with truffles. I felt quite hungry at the sight. My *goûter* had been sparse, and the roast turkey smelt delicious. I had no hesitation in answering in the affirmative when I was asked if I would take some of it.

I thought Madame Marmoret seemed to be muttering very much to herself when she held my plate to her master, and as she returned it to me, her words were audible enough.

‘Extravagance—ruin!’ she let off close to my ears, like so many pistol-shots of anger.

I saw Ange and Tessie colour and look at

me and then at their father, and Mr. Lovett himself seemed to think it was time to put an end to such exhibitions of folly.

‘*Tais-toi !*’ he said quite sharply to the woman, and then, appearing to regret his harshness, he added : ‘ We know what we are about, my friend. Suppose you help me to some potatoes.’

Tessie and Ange made a simultaneous grab at the potato-dish, and, under cover of their alacrity to help their father, Madame grumbled herself out of the room.

When the confusion which followed this episode had somewhat subsided, I looked round the table and saw that neither of the girls had taken any turkey. I suppose their father had offered it to them, but they had not accepted it. Tessie was eating some slices of spiced sausage and bread, and Ange had cut up an entire cucumber as her share of dinner.

‘Do you not eat meat?’ I inquired, without thinking.

To the thoroughbred Briton, there appears something so extraordinary in any one dining on vegetables and bread.

‘No,’ replied Ange, with a pretty blush, ‘we do not care for it. In this country you see few people eat it, and, for my part, I could live upon cucumbers all the year round.’

Mr. Lovett was evidently not one of the ‘few.’ He consumed his turkey and truffles with the air of a real connoisseur, returning to it until he had nearly caused the whole of the breast to disappear, and washing it down with copious draughts of champagne, a bottle of which stood at his elbow. He asked me to take a glass, but I declined. I had never been used to wine, and preferred drinking water, as I saw the girls do. If Mr. Lovett’s daughters did not care for meat, it was not

because they meant to make up the deficiency by pudding, for no second course followed the turkey. Some Gruyère cheese and biscuits were put upon the table for their father, but the flavour was too strong to suit anybody but himself. Tessie picked some ripe figs and grapes from the walls of the house and offered them to me in her sweet shy way, and we sat together on the sill of the window that looked out upon the street, eating our fruit and watching Ange perched upon her father's knee, tying up the silver curls that hung over his brow with little bits of blue ribbon, as she was accustomed to do with her poodle's top-knot.

It was a charming sight to see them together—the handsome old man with his look of proud contentment, and the beautiful girl who was playing with him ; both so like and yet so unlike each other ; she in her extreme youth and innocence, and he with the weight

perhaps of five-and-sixty winters on his brow. Yet, when at last her gentle touch had sent him off to sleep in his chair, he almost seemed the younger of the two, as he lay back, peacefully slumbering, with scarcely a wrinkle on his fair smooth skin, and the little witch's blue ribbons fluttering in his silver hair.

Meanwhile Ange joined Tessie and] myself in the window-sill, and there we sat whispering to each other of all the thousand and one foolish things that enter young women's brains.

'And are you the only English in St. Pucelle?' I asked, after we had finished discussing the place.

'Oh, Tessie! only hear what Hilda is saying!' exclaimed Ange. 'What would Miss Sophia Markham do if she were to hear her? She would have a fit of hysterics, at the very least.'

‘Sophia Markham! That sounds dreadfully English,’ I observed.

‘And Miss Markham considers herself essentially French,’ replied Tessie, laughing. ‘She is constantly putting us right on subjects with which we have been familiar from our birth, and on more than one occasion she has been kind enough to correct our accent for us.’

‘What an unpleasant person! Does she live here?’

‘No; it is difficult to say where she lives——’

‘I can tell you,’ interrupted Ange, ‘with whoever will take her in.’

‘Or let themselves be taken in,’ continued her sister. ‘Miss Markham is ubiquitous. She has no settled home, but we seem to meet her everywhere. This summer she is staying here with a family of the name of Carolus, from Brussels.’

‘And, poor things, how sick they are of her! I am sure I pity them, having to listen to her silly chatter all day.’

‘Well, Ange, it strikes me that Mrs. Carolus and Miss Markham get on very well together. They are inseparable companions, and have always some mutual acquaintance to abuse. This Miss Markham is really clever, Hilda; she can do anything in needle-work, and is very talkative and pleasant——’

‘When there are gentlemen present,’ interposed Ange.

‘Oh, Ange! that is spiteful of you, though I must allow she is more pleasant with them than with her own sex.’

‘Is she a young woman?’ I asked.

‘Oh no! I should think she must be forty or more, but she always talks as if she were very young indeed, and she calls me and Ange “mere children.”’



‘I know the sort of woman you mean, exactly. We had one of them at Norwood, who made herself pre-eminently ridiculous. They can never believe they are too old for love or admiration, and they generally dress so as to make themselves the laughing-stocks of society.’

‘Oh! that is true, Hilda. Miss Markham borrowed a pelerine from Ange last week, and has come out in one exactly like it.’

‘Is it not strange,’ said Ange, musingly, ‘that Madame, who in general dislikes strangers so much, should have taken such a fancy to Sophia Markham? She says she is “*une dame très amiable*,” that she has “*l’air noble*,” and would well adorn a throne! What can Madame see in her to say all that?’

‘I am sure I cannot tell, Ange. Hilda will see her for herself, and then she can judge. But Miss Markham does not comprise the whole English population of St.

Pucelle. There are, I should think, at present about a dozen families of visitors here, beside several single men for shooting.'

'Is there shooting about here, then?'

'Oh yes, in the forest of Piron—wild boars and rabbits, and hares and wolves——'

'*Wolves!* Tessie! Are you in earnest? You make me shiver.'

'Indeed there are! And M. Condé keeps one in a cage, which we will show you. And there is excellent trout-fishing here also, Hilda.'

The mention of sport had recalled my young travelling companion to my mind, and I suddenly exclaimed:

'By the way, I met some one on my journey from England, who told me that he knew you both: some one who met you at Rille, when you went to be confirmed there.'

Notwithstanding the fast-falling dusk, I saw the crimson mount to the cheek of Ange.

‘Who can it be?’ said Tessie. ‘Was it Mr. Henderson, a very old gentleman?’

‘No; this gentleman was quite young.’

‘Not Mr.——’ began Ange, and there she stopped short, and would say no more.

‘Well, I won’t keep you in suspense any longer. It was a Master Frederick Stephenson who is at school at Mr. Felton’s, and was greatly interested at hearing I was coming to live at St. Pucelle. He seems a very nice boy. He was so kind and polite to me about my luggage and train-ticket.’

‘Oh! is that [all?’ said Ange, disappointedly.

‘Ange thought it was a duke at the very least, coming back again to propose for her,’ said her sister.

‘I didn’t,’ pouted the little maid; ‘but we know such heaps of school-boys. It is nothing new to hear they come backwards and forwards. I do not remember Master Stephen-

son, but Mr. Felton is a great friend of papa's, and we stayed at his house whilst we were in Rille.'

'*Bonjour, mesdemoiselles,*' said a courteous voice at the open door, and we started to see a gentleman enter the *salle*.

'Monsieur le Baron!' exclaimed Tessie and Ange in a breath, as they rose to their feet, and having saluted the new-comer, introduced him to me as the Baron de Nesselrode.

'Papa! papa! here is Monsieur le Baron!' cried Ange, as she pulled the blue top-knots out of her father's curls and wakened him with a kiss on either cheek.

Mr. Lovett appeared delighted to welcome his friend, and they were soon engaged in active conversation.

'Such an unfortunate young man,' whispered Tessie to me, under cover of the gentlemen's voices. 'He belongs to one of the

highest families in France, but he got so dreadfully into debt that his creditors have confiscated all his fortune, and only leave him a wretched little estate in St. Pucelle to live upon. Is it not melancholy? The poor Baron always looks so sad and dull to me. He has nothing to do but to shoot and visit his neighbours, and during the winter season we are almost the only people left here. Papa is very fond of him. He pities him so much, and thinks he has been so hardly used for a little wildness.'

'And papa's daughter seems to follow his example,' I said, smiling.

'Oh! no, *indeed!*' remonstrated Tessie, earnestly; 'but it *is* sad to be left to live alone so young—don't you think so? He is not thirty yet.'

Ange, entering at that moment with a lamp, showed me that Armand de Nesselrode was not only young, but very good-

looking, which made me still further inclined to doubt whether fair-haired Tessie had not mistaken her feelings of compassion for him. He had an air of melancholy also that, combined with his dark languid eyes and the story I had heard, made him doubtless a very interesting object. He did not appear, however, to have paid his visit for the sake of seeing the Miss Lovetts, for, after the first ordinary greetings that had passed between them, he confined his attention entirely to their father, with whom he seemed to be on terms of the greatest intimacy. Cigars were produced and lighted, which was apparently the signal for the weaker sex to retire, as Tessie immediately asked me if I would go into the next room with them and have some music. Music I had little inclination for, but the wisdom of withdrawal I saw at once.

‘Papa always likes to be left alone with the Baron,’ said Tessie, as we entered the

smaller apartment, 'they have so much to talk about together.'

The girls asked me to sing, but I begged them to excuse me. I possessed a good voice, and the use of it had formed one of my favourite occupations. I had been accustomed to sing at all sorts of places : in church choirs, for charitable concerts, at evening parties ; and *she* had always been so proud to accompany me to the scenes of my small triumphs, and to double the praises I earned. Now I felt as if I should never sing again.

My voice, except for the common purposes of speech, would be as silent as hers from whom I had inherited it. I have learned since that this is the commonest feeling attendant upon sorrow. But grief was new to me then, and I believed myself to be thoroughly in earnest. Presently Ange sat down to the tinkling old instrument, whose notes were a misery to listen to, and began to

sing—in low tones at first, but louder as she gained confidence—a French *chansonnette*. The little maid had not much volume of voice, I could have extinguished it with mine in a couple of bars; but what she possessed was so sweetly fresh and true, that it was a real pleasure to hear her. I sat at the window gazing up into the dark blue sky, now besprinkled with stars, and could have fancied I was listening to a child-angel singing—that is, if they ever sing *chansonnettes*. By-and-by she passed into a Latin hymn—one of those half-solemn, half-joyous chants that are so much in use in the Catholic churches, and then indeed I could look up to heaven through my tears and wonder if *she* were listening too. Did she know of the sudden change that had taken place in my life, or were all my doings, my thoughts, my joys and my sorrows, to be matters of indifference to her thenceforward; to her who had



ever been so ready to sympathise with me, even if I had a finger-ache? Under the influence of this thought and the music, my tears fell faster, and, unwilling that the girls should perceive my emotion, I rose, with the intention of going to my own room for a few minutes until I should have recovered myself. But the geography of the house was as yet unfamiliar to me, and in the dusk I made a mistake, and turned the handle of the door that led into the *salle* instead of that which would have taken me to the kitchen.

I closed it again at once, but not before I had seen what was going on inside. The Baron and Mr. Lovett were seated close together at the table, playing cards by the light of a shaded lamp. There was not much harm in the circumstance, perhaps, but I had been brought up with rather strict ideas with regard to the clergy, and it offended my ideas of propriety. Yet, after all, what was there

in a game of cards? I asked myself, as soon as I was alone. It was not likely that Mr. Lovett would play for anything but the pleasure of defeating his antagonist. And in a place like St. Pucelle, where there was no amusement to be had but such as one might devise for one's self, it seemed hard that even a clergyman should be deprived of any innocent diversion. So I put the game of cards to one side, under the general decision that I must not judge the customs of one country by those of another.



## CHAPTER VII.

### THE FAIR SOPHIA.

HAD I waited a day or two, I should have had no occasion to ask Teresa Lovett if her family formed the English population of St. Pucelle. The news of my arrival spread like wild-fire, and before a week was over my head, I had been introduced to every individual, English or Belgian, in the place. The very first whom I had the pleasure of meeting was Miss Sophia Markham, who ran in—Miss Markham never walked—on the morning following my arrival. As soon

as I entered the room I recognised her, from the description given me the night before. She was so wonderfully infantile in dress, manner, and conversation. She was a woman of forty—of forty-five—perhaps even fifty years of age, but she was very well preserved and looked much younger. And this preservation had been accomplished, not by means of cosmetics, but by the lack of them. Miss Markham was wise in her generation. She knew that powder and paint never yet hid wrinkles effectually, and that to dye the hair a different colour from that which nature has bestowed upon it, is to violate one of the first principles of art.

But this fact must not lead one to suppose that she was not intensely vain of her personal appearance, and took any amount of trouble to maintain it. For years past she had never gone to bed without plastering her face with cold cream, in order to keep her skin soft and

unwrinkled. Each grey hair, as it made its unwelcome appearance, had been sedulously rooted out, and she spent hours before the looking-glass, brushing and oiling the remainder. She had bestowed equal attention on her teeth and her complexion and her figure, and the result was, that in middle life, though she could not look a girl (as she fondly persisted in thinking that she did), Miss Sophia Markham had certainly contrived to drop at least ten years of her existence. She was a short woman, with a large head, and very small hands and feet, of which she was inordinately vain. She had fine eyes and good teeth ; a large nose and a small brain. But, after the fashion of most mortals, she was so shortsighted as to be quite unable to distinguish in what she excelled and in what she did not, and persisted in imagining that her fleshy nose was a pert *retroussé*, and her mind of a ponderous

and weighty order, equal in value to that of any of her peers.

As a child, she had given promise of a prettiness that had never been fulfilled. This was unfortunate, as her parents' undue admiration had taught her to believe her pretensions would be realised, and after their death she had refused to be convinced that their judgment had proved false. She had been left alone in the world with a small income barely sufficient to procure the necessities of life, and from an early period it had been borne in upon her mind that she must be dependent for its luxuries upon her friends. Miss Sophia knew which side her bread was buttered well enough. She found that, in order to be welcome in other people's houses and allowed to stay there as long as she chose, she must give them a *quid pro quo* for their hospitality over and above the charms of her mind and person, and the questionable

merit of her talents. Some she had to fawn upon and flatter till they were full to surfeiting with praises of themselves: for others she was compelled to exercise her skill in needle-work, and slave at making caps and dresses wherewith to adorn their persons and recoup them for the food she was consuming: to others, again, she acted as a foil or a blind, or in any other useful capacity that a woman past her *première jeunesse* can fill, although she would have been quite faithless and unbelieving had she been told so.

At St. Pucelle she was staying, as Tessie had told me, with a couple of the name of Carolus, who were spending a few months on the Continent. It was easy to guess why *they* had come together. Mrs. Carolus, although older than Miss Markham, was newly-married, and possessed scarcely any knowledge of French. Mr. Carolus also, who was again many years senior to his wife,

was fussy, taciturn, and given, about every other day, to making sudden resolutions to return to England and his merchant's office, which Mrs. Carolus was anxious to prevent. She found, therefore, in Miss Markham at once a companion, an interpreter, and an advocate to plead against and turn the rash intentions of her husband.

At the same time, the two ladies appeared to be of very congenial temperaments, if abusing each other behind their backs and everybody else in common might be taken in evidence of the fact.

On the first occasion of my meeting Miss Sophia Markham, she was attired in a white muslin dress striped with a tiny line of blue, that might have been put on a child of ten : a pelerine edged with lace, the pattern of which she had borrowed from Angela ; and a broad-brimmed hat, trimmed with the same material and ornamented with a bunch of red



cherries and leaves, that bobbed about in the most tempting manner each time she moved. In her arms she carried a little beast of a terrier, that snapped at every one who approached within a few yards of it, and which she spoke of and addressed as if it had been a human being.

In attempting to sketch a biography of Miss Markham as it came to my knowledge, little by little, I have made one grand omission, which is to state that, throughout her varied career, she had never lost, and evidently never would lose, the hope of being married. When she was young, nothing but a duke or a marquis could have satisfied her sense of what befitted her merits; in riper years, a baronet or a general would not have been rejected without consideration: now, she would have sworn to love, honour and obey anything, so long as it was in the shape of a man. From the youth of eighteen or

twenty to the octogenarian, she could not be made to believe but that the whole race of man had been formed but for one purpose : to admire, follow, and fall in love with her. Yet she was by no means a specimen, at least outwardly, of what is termed 'a spiteful old maid.' All Miss Markham's speeches were placid, and her words oil and honey. Even when she intended to sting most sharply, it was done under cover of the greatest amiability and the very best intentions, and she never lost an opportunity of wounding the self-love of others by encouraging and patronising them for that which they believed they did better than anything else. But I have spent too much time on a description of Miss Markham's failings. She must come forward now and speak for herself.

When I first entered the room where she was sitting, I found her engaged in an animated conversation with the 'little maid,'

on the component parts of a certain ball-dress which she had worn the month before at Paris.

‘Yes! it was so pretty, dear, the prettiest dress in the room, everybody said so—all pink and white silk—the very palest pink, you know—and little rosebuds peeping out every here and there from the trimming, and one gentleman said I looked just like a little rosebud myself in the midst of my pink and white drapery! He! he! he!’

At this juncture my entrance was perceived, and an introduction gone through.

‘*Marsh!*’ exclaimed Miss Markham, as if she had not heard my name before; ‘are you any relation to the Marshes of Northampton?’

‘No! I have never heard of them.’

‘They were great friends of mine—indeed, Walter Marsh wanted to marry me—he! he! he!—only I wouldn’t have him. - He always used to call me “the pocket Venus;” and

when I refused him, his family thought he would have gone out of his mind.'

'You are so hard-hearted, Sophia! you have refused so many people,' cried Tessie, laughing; but Miss Markham did not perceive that the laugh was against herself.

'Well, one cannot marry every one, you see, and perhaps my early experience has made me rather particular. I was engaged to Lord Vauxhall, you know, before I was sixteen. Such a handsome man, and with an income of ten thousand a year. Ah! I was very foolish in those days.'

'Why didn't you marry him?' asked Ange.

'Well, dear, I broke off the engagement myself. I had been taught to look higher by my dear father, who did not think any man in the world good enough for me. Mrs. Carolus cannot understand such a thing. She evidently married the first man who asked her—and such a man, too! If you

could only see the way he mumbles his food, it is enough to make one leave the dinner-table. And they go on in the most absurd manner for people of their age. She calls him "Willy," and if he does anything she disapproves of, she says he's "a naughty boy." Did you ever hear anything like it? I have found out, from some things Mrs. Carolus has told me, that she must be past sixty herself. Why, she was at a finishing school when King William died. And as for Mr. Carolus, he must be ten or fifteen years older. He has had a wife before, and twelve children. I think he ought to have been ashamed of himself for marrying again. But as for her, poor thing! I expect it was her only chance, so you can scarcely wonder at her taking it. And I *have* heard—but mind you don't mention my name—that she was not *too* particular in her younger days, and so I dare say it was rather unexpected her receiving an offer of

marriage at all. My friends the Willoughbys met some people in Norfolk this spring, who lived in the same place as Mrs. Carolus's family, and I hear they had some very queer stories to tell about her sisters and herself.'

'Isn't it a great pity,' said Tessie, quietly, 'that people should trouble themselves to take away the character of a woman who is a perfect stranger to them?'

'Oh! but she was not a perfect stranger, my dear! They knew her well—by repute, that is to say. And, indeed, from all one hears, she must have been quite notorious some twenty or thirty years ago.'

'Is it wise of you to stay with her, then?' asked Ange, innocently.

I found afterwards that the little maid was very much in the habit of putting awkward questions in the most aggravatingly innocent manner. The present one caused Miss Markham to redden up like a peony.

‘As for that matter, Ange,’ she retorted, ‘I might go far enough, I expect, before I found any one to stay with against whose advantage there is not to be heard some story or other. I dare say Mrs. Carolus is no worse than many of your own friends; Lucy Edgecombe for instance, who ran away with and married a man against her parents’ wishes, and found out afterwards that he had a wife already in America. That was a nice little scandal, wasn’t it?’

‘Ah! poor Lucy!’ said Ange, her bright eyes filling with tears; ‘it has been a most terrible grief and misfortune for her—you know that, Miss Markham. I am sure I can never think of her without crying. She used to be such a bright merry girl when we knew her in Rille, two years ago. And it broke her poor old father’s heart.’

‘Oh yes! I dare say. These scandals always do break the heart of somebody or

other, and generally the one who is least to blame in the matter. But that doesn't alter the fact. Why do you let Ange wear her hair so much over her eyes, Tessie? It is not *bong tong* at all. The Paris ladies all wear their hair taken off the forehead, as I do. But then you must have a high, intellectual forehead for that style to suit you.'

'Papa likes her to wear it so,' said Tessie.

'And I am not a Paris lady, and I have not a high intellectual forehead,' interposed Ange. 'So I'm much better as I am.'

'Perhaps so, my dear. Indeed your forehead is not high. Arthur Thrale was remarking only the other day that you had more of the *paysanne* than the *ancienne noblesse* air about you.'

'Yet I should like to see papa's pedigree placed by that of Arthur Thrale,' cried Tessie, indignantly. 'We have some of the best blood in England in our veins, though we



are so poor. Papa has often said so, and Mrs. Carolus told us the other day that Mr. Thrale's father is a large linendraper in one of the suburbs of London.'

'Of course Mrs. Carolus will run the poor boy down, because he is so absurdly devoted to me. She has tried all she can to get him for herself, without success.'

'Oh! Sophia! what can you be thinking of?' exclaimed Tessie. 'Why, Arthur Thrale is young enough to be——'

'What?' demanded Miss Markham, sharply.

'Mrs. Carolus's grandson,' replied Tessie, saving herself by a grand *coup d'état*.

'So he may be,' said Miss Markham, drawing a long breath of relief, 'but that makes no difference to her. Her jealousy of me is proverbial. She has even said—he! he! he!—that I have tried to turn "Willy's" affections from her.'

'There goes papa,' remarked Ange, more

with the intention of diverting attention from the folly of their visitor than anything else, as she pointed out Mr. Lovett walking past the window on his way to the town.

‘Well, good-bye then, dears, I can’t stay any longer,’ exclaimed Miss Markham with sudden energy, as she jumped up and kissed the two girls. ‘Adieu ! Miss Marsh ; I hope we shall soon meet again. Come ! my sweet little Toodles,’ to the terrier, who was leaping and yapping round her ; ‘did it want to go for a walk ? Then its mammy shall take it for one, the dear little angel ;’ and off she tripped, with the dog at her heels, in the same direction as that taken by Mr. Lovett.

‘I wonder,’ said Ange thoughtfully, as she watched her from the open window, ‘why Sophia Markham always pretends to like papa so much. She is generally so bitter against old men and women. But just look at her now, Hilda. She is actually taking his

arm. And oh ! do see the cherries bobbing up and down in his face, I should catch one in my mouth if I were he. But do you think she is in earnest, Hilda, or is it humbug ?

‘ How can I tell, Ange ? I have only seen the woman for an hour. But even from that short experience, I should feel very much disposed to call it “ humbug.” Miss Markham has not the face of a true woman, neither would I like to have her for my friend.’

‘ I observed that you were very silent during her visit.’

‘ I was listening to what she said, and judging her out of her own mouth ; and I do not think your father would have cared for the style of conversation she kept up with you this morning. It was worse than idle.’

‘ I think papa rather likes Miss Markham than otherwise,’ remarked Ange. ‘ He is always pleased when she spends the evening here.’

‘Because she is such an abominable flatterer,’ said Tessie. ‘She praises up his appearance, and his preaching, and his daughters to him, till he does not know whether he is on his head or his heels. Any one would like it.’

‘Oh! Tessie! you do not suppose that papa could be influenced by a woman like that, just because she flattered him,’ cried Ange, with holy horror.

‘Well, no, perhaps not,’ replied Tessie, dubiously, whilst I thought myself that Mr. Lovett must be the saint his little daughter made him out, and not a man, if he were proof against flattery, even from Miss Markham.



## CHAPTER VIII.

MADAME FROMARD.

TESSIE had prophesied that Mrs. Carolus and Miss Markham would not call in each other's company, and so it happened. The married lady did not pay her visit till some days after her friend, and then it was performed with much greater ceremony. The two girls had gone out for a walk together towards Artois, and I had promised to follow them as soon as I had finished a long epistle which I was writing to dear Mrs. Sandilands, descriptive of my new life and the thoughts it had

brought to me. I had sealed my letter and put on my black hat and cloak, when Madame Marmoret shouted at me from the kitchen staircase that Mrs. Carolus had arrived, and was waiting to see me in the *salon*. I would willingly have avoided her, but found, on inquiry, that she had asked for me by name, and Madame had confessed I was at home. So there was no alternative but to receive her, and I descended to the sitting-room with my letter in my hand. I found Mrs. Carolus robed in state, with a Parisian bonnet on and a Parisian mantle, and new lavender-coloured gloves. Her grandeur quite overcame me, and I felt very meek in my straw hat bound with crape, and my untrimmed, every-day costume.

‘Miss Marsh, I believe,’ she said, as she shook hands with me, and I was fain to acknowledge that she believed aright.

‘I have delayed my visit to you for a few

days, Miss Marsh,' Mrs. Carolus continued, 'not from any want of desire to make your acquaintance, I can assure you ; but because I consider it the height of ill-breeding to rush upon a stranger the very minute of her arrival, without giving her time to turn round, as if a lady had nothing else to do, at the end of a fatiguing journey, than to make the acquaintance of a pack of people she has never seen before.'

'It is very considerate of you,' I said.

'I think it is only polite, and I have hinted the same to others ; but my advice is not often taken, I find, especially by those who are most indebted to me. My husband, Mr. Carolus,' said the bride, with an attempt at a blush, 'would have had the pleasure of accompanying me to-day ; but he is suffering from a little indigestion, and I forbid him to move.'

'I am sorry Mr. Carolus is ill.'

‘It is not serious ; but gentlemen are difficult creatures to keep in order, as perhaps you will discover for yourself some day. You know my friend Miss Markham, I think ?’

‘Yes ; she called here the day after my arrival.’

‘I guessed as much ! Mr. Lovett is the great attraction here, I believe ; but I cannot say I have ever seen much good result from single ladies running after gentlemen in that way—widowers or not. But this is a terrible place for flirtation, Miss Marsh ! and you will have as many opportunities of pursuing it as anybody.’

‘Indeed ! I do not quite understand you.’

‘Why, all the young men in St. Pucelle collect about Mr. Lovett. He is a general favourite with them. Have you not seen the Baron de Nesselrode here ?’

‘Yes ; he comes almost every evening.’



‘Just so. Some people think it is a pity that Mr. Lovett should encourage his young friends so much. It is not as if they came to speak of the things that a clergyman is usually supposed to talk about, you know.’

‘But surely young men could never derive anything but benefit from association with such a good man as Mr. Lovett,’ I replied. ‘You should hear his daughters speak of him, Mrs. Carolus. They cannot find terms high enough in which to sing their father’s praises.’

‘Oh yes, my dear ; I have heard them speak of him. And, of course, no one could dare to say that he would do his friends any harm. But still, there’s the Baron, you see. Poor fellow ! he’s gambled away more than two-thirds of his fortune already, and has to live on a pittance until his debts are discharged. It is a pity, is it not, that he should not have given up cards even yet ? I

wish dear good Mr. Lovett would remonstrate with him on the subject, and advise him better. But he is too easy with young men. I understand he was very wild himself in his early days—at least, so my Willy tells me—and that makes him disposed to be lenient, perhaps, with others.’

I felt that to this speech I had no answer to make, so I evaded it with a remark :

‘With two such pretty girls in the house,’ I said, ‘I should have thought people would have had no difficulty in deciding the motive which made young men congregate about their father.’

‘Oh no, my dear, it’s not that,’ replied Mrs. Carolus, hastily. ‘He has not got either of them off his hands yet, you see, though the eldest must be seven-and-twenty.’

‘Three-and-twenty,’ I murmured in correction.

‘Only three-and-twenty ! Dear me ! She

looks very old for her age. There *was* a talk, some few months ago, of the little one being very much admired by a young fellow of the name of—let me see, what was his name? I declare I have quite forgotten it. But Sophia can tell you—Sophia can always remember a gentleman's name, whatever she forgets. However, the Lovetts met him at Rille, where their father takes them every now and then; and I suppose he paid Miss Angela some attention (for that little one really, is very nice-looking), but it came to nothing after all; and it's my opinion they'll neither of them ever be married.'

'What a terrible fate!' I said, laughing.

'Ah, well, my dear Miss Marsh, you may be able to afford to laugh at the idea; but a single life *is* a terrible fate for a woman after all! And how it sours them! Just look at Sophia Markham! That girl—I call her a girl, you know, but in reality she is many

years older than myself; and I might have been married fifty times over before I made up my mind to take Willy—well, to hear her speak of her own sex is shocking! She has never a good word to say for any one of them. Now, I am sure I may trust you, Miss Marsh, and you won't mention my name again, if I tell you that the way Sophia Markham has gone on under my roof has distressed me to that degree, that I can never invite her to stay with me again—never! No gentleman is safe from her attacks—young or old, rich or poor, it is all the same. She would carry my Willy off from under my very eyes if I would let her! But I drew the line there. Of course I cannot interfere with her goings-on in other directions; still, it annoys me greatly. For I am quite convinced she will never be married. Not on account of her age; though I think few people would credit she is only ten years my senior,' added Mrs.

Carolus with a smirk, 'but because of her manners, which are bold and forward to a degree. But you were going out, Miss Marsh! I am afraid I am detaining you.'

'I was going to post this letter, and then to join the Miss Lovetts, who have gone for a walk on the Artois road.'

'Do not let me keep you any longer, then; indeed, I will walk a little way with you if you will permit me,' said Mrs. Carolus.

I did not particularly wish for the company of this lady, who appeared to me only a degree less objectionable than her friend, but as it was drawing near the post-time, and I was anxious that Mrs. Sandilands should get my letter without delay, I consented to the proposal made me.

'Do you consider that Mr. Lovett is likely to marry again, Miss Marsh?' inquired Mrs. Carolus, as we left the house together.

The question took me so completely by

surprise, that I did not know what to answer.

‘Indeed,’ I said, ‘I have been here far too short a time to be able to form any opinion on the matter.’

‘I should think it very improbable myself, with those girls dependent on him, and in the state of his affairs too ; but doubtless you know quite as much about *them* as I do. Everybody in St. Pucelle is admiring you so much for coming to live with them, Miss Marsh, and says that it is an act of pure benevolence on your part.’

‘I am afraid you are giving me more credit than I deserve, Mrs. Carolus. I came here on the invitation of Mr. Lovett, simply because I needed change of scene, and I considered myself more than any one else in making the decision.’

‘Ah ! and so did he, my dear—so did he. There is little doubt of that. But what is to

become of those poor girls when he is gone ? He can't last for ever, you know. He must be past seventy now !

‘ I have never thought of it. It does not come within my province to do so.’

‘ To be sure not, and I trust it never may. Death is a sad thing ! I suppose you know pretty nearly every one in St. Pucelle by this time, Miss Marsh.’

‘ I think I have made acquaintance with all the ladies. A very pretty girl, a Mrs. Arthur Johnstone called upon me yesterday. She does not look much older than Ange.’

‘ Poor child ! yes, she has very tolerable features. For my part, I like her, but one cannot quite shut one's ears to all one hears. Did the husband come with her ?’

‘ No !’

‘ I thought as much ! He never goes anywhere. Only too glad to keep out of sight,

I should think. The Ormerods tell me he has been cashiered from the army !

‘How dreadful for his poor little wife ! And she seems so cheerful too. She laughed the whole time she was with us yesterday.’

‘Perhaps she doesn’t know it, or doesn’t care. You will meet strange characters abroad, my dear. The Continent is the general refuge for all those who are unable to live in England.’

‘So I have heard,’ I answered listlessly.

I was thinking of Frederick Stephenson’s stories on the same subject, and it vexed me. It was not pleasant to believe one’s self surrounded by a set of dishonourable vagabonds. And if it were so, I would rather have been left to find it out for myself than have been told of it by Mrs. Carolus. We had reached the high ground by this time which led to the Artois road, and I was looking about me with the admiration with which I never



ceased to view the country that surrounded St. Pucelle. The grass we trod upon sent up a grateful fragrance of crushed herbs, and little tufts of flowers grew between each cleft of the rocky hill as if they had been planted there on purpose for effect.

As we strolled along, we gazed down upon the town which we had quitted, lying in the steep hollow beneath us, with its long narrow street of wooden houses and grey granite walls, peopled by women in short petticoats, bare feet, and snowy caps, with men in blue blouses and leathern aprons, with rough carts drawn by oxen, and a heterogeneous mass of children tumbling about in the stream of dirty water which the gutter conveyed rapidly to its level in the valley. On the summit of the green hill which we had to gain before descending, like the dirty water, to Artois, there stood a large wooden Calvary, which might be seen for many miles round.

Rough as this representation of the most important event that ever occurred in the world's history was upon a closer inspection, its size and colouring, with the green mound on which it was erected, gave it a very solemn appearance when viewed from a distance, particularly when, as was the case on this occasion, a group of worshippers knelt at the foot of the Cross.

We instinctively dropped our voices and walked slower as we approached the Calvary, but before we had passed it, a woman and a little girl rose hastily and confronted us. They were peasants, and carried covered baskets, filled probably with butter and eggs. The woman was wiping her eyes on the corner of her rough apron, when she perceived Mrs. Carolus, and gave her a '*Bon jour, madame.*'

My companion returned the greeting, and we were continuing our walk when the woman

suddenly ran after us and touched Mrs. Carolus on the sleeve.

‘Is that the demoiselle that has come to live with Monsieur le Curé Anglais?’ she demanded in her own language, as she intimated me with her forefinger.

‘*Je ne comprendz pas,*’ replied Mrs. Carolus.

Notwithstanding my inexperience of speaking French, I thought I could do a little better in the way of verbs than this, and ventured to answer the woman myself.

‘Yes! I am the demoiselle. What do you want?’

But on hearing these few faltering words, the poor woman gave vent to such a mingled torrent of tears and explanations, that I was out of my depth again directly. She was *désolée*; she was *distracte*; she would pray that the good Lord would take her life, only

that Monsieur l'Abbé would refuse her absolution if she did so.

But would mademoiselle conceive of her position. Monsieur le Curé Anglais was so beloved and so respected, '*c'est un homme si bon, si amiable, si dévoué.*' How could one go to him again for the fourteenth time in a month, and ask for his pity, his benevolence, his compassion? But then mademoiselle must consider her family. She had five children to provide for, and here was the eldest, not old enough to do more than carry the baskets to and from the Artois market. It was but little they wanted; they had been very patient, and she had been praying the *bon Dieu* for more patience, but mademoiselle must know that people cannot live without eating, though 'twas but little enough they had had inside them for the last month.'

'But what has all this got to do with me?'  
I said in despair.

‘I had tried to translate the question three times into French, but failing to do so, was obliged to have recourse to Mrs. Carolus and the English language.’

‘Oh! I think I can guess fast enough,’ she replied, with a sarcastic laugh.

The woman, with the quickness of her race, had caught the meaning of my words and answered them.

‘If mademoiselle would only speak for me,’ she pleaded, ‘we are so poor, and *mon mari* has been in his bed for the last twelvemonth. A few francs, mademoiselle. We do not ask for a large sum, but if we could have half, or even a quarter of it.’

‘Does she want me to give her money?’ I inquired in my bewilderment of Mrs. Carolus.

‘I should hardly think so. There are no beggars here. What does she say?’

‘She says she is so poor—they have

not enough to eat, and her husband is ill.'

'Give her half a franc, then ; but I should hardly think it is true. The Catholics are too well looked after to want.

I tendered the coin to the woman, but she pushed it away impatiently.

'No ! no ! mademoiselle,' she said, shaking her head, 'I am not a beggar. I do not want your charity.'

'Then what *do* you want?' I asked, defying grammar and accent in my desire to make her understand.

'*Mon droit,*' she answered proudly.

'What is your name?' I said.

'I am Madame Fromard.'

'*Fromard !*' echoed Mrs. Carolus suddenly ; 'you sell eggs, don't you ? *vous vendez urfs—urfs et boor ?*' she repeated for Madame Fromard's benefit.

'*Oui, madame ! oui ! des œufs et du beurre.*'

‘Oh! I know her well. You’d better come on, Miss Marsh. It is of no use stopping to talk to this woman. She will keep you till midnight if you let her.’

‘What is her cause of complaint?’ I said, as, having bidden Madame Fromard farewell, and left her snivelling and wiping her eyes upon her apron, we strolled on together.

Mrs. Carolus regarded me with a very curious expression.

‘Haven’t you found out?’ she said; ‘I thought you understood French.’

‘So I do, after the English fashion, but when these natives begin to chatter, they run on so fast, there is no keeping pace with them. I could make out that she was very poor and wanted francs, but I suppose they would all say that, if they found any one to listen to them.’

‘You’ll understand them a great deal better after you have been here a little while,’ re-

plied Mrs. Carolus, mysteriously, so mysteriously and unpleasantly, indeed, that I did not like her manner at all, and was quite glad when I perceived the figures of Tessie and Ange advancing to meet us.

‘What a time you have been!’ exclaimed the little maid. ‘We have walked half way to Artois and back. Monsieur Condé met us, and wanted us to go into the park and see him shoot a young bear he keeps there that has become dangerous—horrid man! as if we would; and he is coming to see you very soon, Hilda. He is anxious to take you over the grottoes. He thinks they are the only things worth seeing in the world.’

‘What grottoes?’

‘Why, the grottoes of St. Jean! Have you never heard of them? They are very wonderful, full of beautiful crystals and stalactites. We must make a party and go over



them some day. It is no fun going alone. Have you seen them, Mrs. Carolus ?'

'Oh yes ! We visited them on our first arrival here, and thought them very interesting.'

It was more, however, than Mrs. Carolus appeared to think our conversation, for she declined to turn back with us again.

'Tell them all about Mère Fromard,' she called out to me before she finally disappeared.

'What about Mère Fromard ?' asked Tessie.

So I told them of the peasants we had encountered kneeling at the Calvary, and the broken conversation that had subsequently ensued between us. I saw Tessie and Ange exchange glances as I proceeded with my story, and I fancied they were not pleased with it.

'I could barely catch her meaning,' I con-

cluded, 'but I fancy she mentioned your names. I suppose you know her.'

'Oh yes! we know her well,' said Tessie.

'Is she amongst the poor that you visit?'

'There are no families here whom we visit in the way you mean. Monsieur l'Abbé looks after them too well for that. But we go if they are sick or in trouble, as we should offer our sympathy to any other friends.'

'This poor woman seemed in trouble.'

'Ange will go and see her as soon as she has time,' said Tessie. 'For the present, we cannot do her any good, so let us take this little path into the town, or we may meet her again. She is very troublesome to shake off if she once gets a hearing.'

I thought both the girls seemed graver and less sympathetic than they usually were when talking of their poorer neighbours, and I concluded that the Fromards were not amongst the most deserving in St. Pucelle.

Mr. Lovett appeared at dinner-time looking as handsome and benignant as usual, and quite full of the pleasant stroll he had had with Miss Markham, and the successful manner in which she had beguiled the time.

‘She is a most amusing companion,’ he said. ‘Her fund of anecdotes seems inexhaustible, and she tells her stories in an irresistibly funny manner. I do not know when I have laughed so much as I did this afternoon.’

‘I am glad you enjoyed yourself, papa,’ remarked Tessie, quietly.

‘I did indeed! Miss Markham reminds me in a powerful degree of the late Duchess of Rochester, who was one of the wittiest women in society in Lord Amor’s time. And she is well-looking for her age too—very well-looking!’

‘She is better than well-looking, is Made-

moiselle Markham,' said the shrill voice of Marmoret, as she placed a roast hare before her master; 'she has got money, and that's worth all the beauty in the world, in my opinion.'

'It's not a bad thing, Madame, is it,' replied Mr. Lovett; 'but how do you know the lady in question possesses any?'

'Why, by using my eyes, to be sure! Do you think I'm blind, or a fool, like some I could mention? Look at that demoiselle's dresses. Why! she wears a fresh muslin every morning, and the silk she went to church in last Sunday would have stood of itself. Of course she's got money. How do you suppose she could pay for such things else?'

'Perhaps she doesn't pay for them,' remarked my guardian facetiously, but he had to answer for doubting the truth of Madame Marmoret's expressed opinion.

‘*Doesn’t pay for them!*’ she echoed in a tone steeped in vinegar. ‘Why should you imagine such a scandal? It is not everybody, remember, who would stoop to defraud honest people of their money, when they’ve worked hard to earn it.’

The woman was in such an evident rage that the two girls looked quite frightened.

‘Dear Madame, do be reasonable,’ pleaded Tessie.

But Mr. Lovett put it down with a higher hand.

‘Come—come! let us have no nonsense of this kind,’ he said. ‘I like to have my dinner in peace, or I shall digest nothing that I eat; and as for you, Madame, the kitchen is your arena for display, and not the *salle à manger*.’

‘And much you would get to eat or to digest either, if I stayed there,’ she exclaimed, as she flounced off to her own domains.

The girls looked annoyed, as they always

did when Madame Marmoret displayed any temper, but their father laughed as if it were a very good joke.

‘She will go out in the court and cool herself upon the flagstones,’ he said, ‘meanwhile we will discuss our dinner. Hilda, my dear, may I help you to a little of this hare?’

I had found, since the first day of my dining with them, that his daughters never partook of the same dish as he did, and I had learnt to follow their example. It is true that, considering the amount that was to be deducted from my income for my keep, I might reasonably have considered myself entitled to the best that was put upon the table; but there was a strong feeling in me against sharing in the luxuries which they were forbidden. I liked them both too well. The meals greatly varied too, both in quality and quantity. I had found that out already.

Sometimes there was barely sufficient to go round the family, and that of food of the commonest or most distasteful quality ; at others, we rejoiced in an influx of fish, flesh, and fowl—a regular *embarras des richesses*, and accompanied by bottles of champagne and burgundy. On such occasions the old father would be in the very best of spirits, laughing and jesting with us all, and brilliant with repartee and anecdote. At others, he would seem low and despondent, remaining silent during the dinner hour, or alluding only to his poverty and altered circumstances.

Then his girls would vie with each other to pet and caress him, reminding him of his past successes, and of what a favourite he was at the Belgian Court, until he would leave them with the determination to write to some of his friends in office and seek redress for the hardness of his position.

Yet the very next day, perhaps, we would

have trout for breakfast and beef for dinner, and all would go merry as a marriage bell.

To-day the secret springs that moved the machinery of the kitchen and larder had evidently gone right, for the roast hare was crowned with red currant jelly and flanked by sauterne; but I refused all the dainties Mr. Lovett pressed upon me, and preferred to eat stewed veal, the commonest dish of the country, with Tessie and Ange instead.

‘I heard an unpleasant thing to-day about some acquaintances of ours,’ remarked Mr. Lovett, as he finished his second plate of hare — ‘a very unpleasant thing, indeed.’

‘From Miss Markham, papa?’ inquired Tessie, timidly.

‘Yes; but not repeated with the slightest ill-nature, I can assure you. In fact, I was quite charmed with the candid and liberal manner in which the story was told me.



The truth is, Miss Markham, who is quite a woman of the world and shows a wonderful interest in you two girls, considered it quite her duty to inform me of it, and I assured her she was right.'

'Oh, papa! what is it?' cried Ange, anxiously.

'Nothing to alarm you, my little maid. It is only about the Johnstones. Miss Markham does not think Mrs. Johnstone a very desirable acquaintance for you, and neither do I.'

'What has she done, sir?' I inquired.

'Nothing herself, my dear Hilda, at least that I have heard of, but the husband appears to be a very loose character. It seems that he was cashiered from the army for gambling, and left England only to prevent himself from being arrested for debt.'

'Oh, how dishonourable that is!' I exclaimed. 'I think there is no meanness

equal to that of defrauding tradesmen of their due.'

'And neither do I,' said Angela, stoutly. Tessie sat by and heard us, but she said nothing.

'Yet it is hard that her husband's dishonesty should inculcate poor Mrs. Johnstone,' I observed; 'perhaps she knows nothing of it all.'

'Perhaps not,' replied Mr. Lovett, 'but she shares his disgrace. It is the penalty of having married a man without principle. And I would not have my children's names associated with hers, after what I have heard to-day. So mind, girls, what I say. Be civil to her when you meet, but don't go to her house any more, nor invite her to come here.'

'I am *so* sorry for the Johnstones,' remarked Tessie, softly, as we sat in our own room together afterwards.

‘*I am not,*’ said Ange ; ‘ I think there is nothing so horrible in this world as swindling tradesmen. Fancy, going to a lot of poor people who trust your honour, and getting clothes and provisions out of them, and then running away and leaving them to pay for you. It is so pitifully mean and ungenerous.’

‘ I quite agree with you, Ange,’ I said ; ‘ still, people do sometimes get into debt before they are aware of it.’

‘ I can’t believe that,’ returned the little maid ; ‘ no one but a child or an idiot could do that. Why, if papa were to swindle or cheat people, I don’t think I could ever speak to him again. It would break my heart with shame and agony. I should never be able to look anybody in the face. Would you, Tessie ?’

‘ What did you say, dear ? I was not listening.’

‘ Wouldn’t you rather that papa were dead

than a cheat and a swindler like Mr. Johnstone ?'

'Oh, Ange! don't say such hard things of people.'

'Are they too hard? I didn't think they could be. Well! there's one comfort in hearing of such villany. It makes one feel so thankful that papa is not as other men are! The dear, dear, good old pappy! If he had ever done such things, I should die at once.'



## CHAPTER IX.

### SUNDAY.

SUNDAY at St. Pucelle was not such an uninteresting day as I had anticipated. On the first Saturday I spent there, I passed through the kitchen and detected Tessie, with a large holland apron and bib pinned over her serge dress, busily employed in making tartlets. How fair and gentle she looked—somehow after I had seen Ange I never could call Tessie pretty, although her sweet womanly face gained by the contrast with that of her lovely sister. There she stood with her

sleeves rolled off her arms, and a smile dimpling every feature as I confronted her.

‘Making good things for to-morrow’s dinner?’ I asked.

‘Oh no! though I’ll keep some for you, Hilda, if you particularly wish it. These are for papa during the service.’

‘*For papa during the service!*’ I could not help re-echoing her words. There seemed something so intensely ludicrous in the idea of a minister of the Church consuming jam tarts between the Litany and the Communion.

‘Yes; he requires something to keep him up, you know. It is very fatiguing for an old man to read and preach for two hours at a time, so we always prepare him a little *goûter* in the vestry.’

‘Has Mr. Lovett no help, then?’

‘A layman occasionally reads the lessons for him. Young Mr. Thrale has promised to

do so to-morrow, but otherwise he has all the work on his own hands.'

'And three services a day, I suppose?'

'Oh no! only one in the morning. There are not enough Protestants to make it worth while. No one would come a second time. But I hope you will like our service, Hilda. It is nothing very grand, of course, but Ange and I try to make the singing as nice as we can, and nothing could exceed papa's preaching. It is beautiful!'

When I had become acquainted with the Protestant service held in the schoolroom vacated by the little Romanists of St. Pucelle, I agreed with Tessie, that, considering all the disadvantages it laboured under, it was very nice, and it owed much of its success to the labours of herself and Ange. From the moment that Sunday dawned, these two girls were very important people indeed. They appeared to me to combine the offices of sacristan, clerk,

organist and choir all in one. As soon as their breakfast was completed they ran over to the schoolroom to make sure that it was properly aired, dusted and swept : to arrange the Communion table, which was stowed away in a cupboard during the week : to see that the benches were properly placed ; the tiny harmonium pulled into position, and the lessons and hymns for the day looked out ready for their father and themselves. They had the arrangements for all the music and chanting in their own hands, and merely placed a list of the hymns to be sung on the Communion table ; which always bore a vase of flowers set there by Ange.

Of course they had secured me to take part in the singing, which I was willing enough to do. To sing praise to God and to sing songs to the piano were two different things. I felt I came nearer *her* whilst engaged in the former practice, and that if my



dull ears could only be opened, I might be able to distinguish her own sweet voice mingling with mine.

So at a few minutes before eleven, we three girls were established behind the harmonium ; Tessie in front of it as accompanist, and Ange and I on either side, to take soprano and alto as lustily as we could, and induce the congregation to chime in.

It was difficult to divest one's mind of the idea that we were only in a schoolroom, nor to help being amused by the remarks Ange made on the people as they filed in, one after another. There were the poor condemned Johnstones, looking handsomer and more stylish than anybody there : there were, of necessity, the giddy Sophia Markham, with young Thrale in close attendance : Mr. and Mrs. Carolus, dressed in their newest and best. Colonel Berwick, with his interminable family of girls and boys—a gentleman of

such ultra-Protestant views that he would not permit his children to pass the Catholic church in their daily walks, for fear the Abbé Morteville should rush out and baptise them all in the middle of the road : Mrs. Dart, a handsome widow, of whose antecedents no one could find out anything ; and a dozen or more stray men and women whose names I had been told, but who were not particularly intimate with the Lovetts. These naturally did not constitute the resident part of the population of St. Pucelle, who were all Catholics.

They were the English visitors only, who filled the two little primitive hotels of the town—the Hôtel de la Cloche and the Hôtel de l'Étoile—for three to six months in the year. They had scarcely settled down in their seats—Miss Markham having turned round first and nodded to us all in a manner which I thought most irreverent in a place of

worship — when Mr. Lovett entered and ascended the temporary pulpit that was dragged out of the cupboard with the Communion-table every Sunday morning. As I saw the old man in his surplice and bands, I was ready to agree with all the admiration his daughters bestowed upon him ; he looked so handsome, so venerable and so much like a saint, that he was what the nurses term ‘a perfect picture.’

As he knelt in prayer, with his finely-shaped hands clasped together, his beautiful blue eyes upraised to heaven, and his silver curls crowning a brow which must have befitted an Antinous in earlier days, he should have been painted for a prophet or an apostle, pleading with the Almighty for mercy on sins which he knew only through the weakness of others. And if I thought my guardian’s personal appearance striking on that occasion, I was still more delighted with

his delivery. His elocution was remarkable. Each word fell from his lips with musical distinctness, and it was evident that the art had formed an important part of his studies. He read the lessons—young Thrale being too nervous to do so when it came to the point—as I had never heard them read before. Without any theatrical display, he gave the New Testament history for the day, as a history, not divided into so many monotonous verses badly punctuated, but strongly and energetically delivered, with an expression that must have riveted the attention of every one who was listening to him.

I felt at once that there stood before me a man of no common parts or learning, a man who should have been (as his daughter had fondly said) set in a high place to give light to the world. Nor was I disappointed by the sermon that followed the prayers. It was stirring—terse—to the point, and de-

livered with energy. The blue eyes flashed with anger or glowed with feeling as he denounced sin or invited to pardon, and when in a few words he described the horrors that awaited the impenitent, a thrill of terror ran through his congregation.

I felt it keenly, and glanced towards my companions to see what effect it had upon them. Tessie was looking like an ordinary mortal, quietly interested ; but Ange had her whole attention riveted on her father's words and face. Her eyes were filled with tears, her cheeks were glowing, her whole expression was one of adoring admiration. When Mr. Lovett had finished his sermon, which was so superabundantly superior to anything I had ever heard from a pulpit before, that I was quite surprised the congregation did not applaud him, she waked up from her reverie with a start and a long-drawn sigh, and had only time to whisper hurriedly to me, 'Isn't

he perfect ?' before the harmonium struck up again, and we rose to sing the parting hymn.

The service, simply as it was conducted, had had such a solemn effect upon me that I was disgusted to see Miss Sophia Markham, before she left the schoolroom, approach the place where we were sitting, and to hear her ask Ange in a loud whisper if we would all go over to their hotel in the afternoon and have tea with them.

'Arthur Thrale's friend—the sporting man—my great admirer (you know who I mean), has promised to come over from Rille, if possible, and we can all go for a walk over the hills together. *You* can come, can't you, if the others won't ?'

I saw the crimson colour rush like a flood over Ange's lovely face, but she shook her head determinately in answer to the invitation.

'We make a rule of never going out on Sundays, Miss Markham.'

‘Oh, well ! just as you like, you know ; but I thought it would give you pleasure. What are you going to do to-morrow ?’

‘Papa will be waiting for us in the vestry, Ange,’ whispered Tessie, who had put away the chant-books and did not appear to like this sort of conversation going on in church any more than I did.

Ange took the hint, and, rising without further ceremony, we walked up to the little room where Mr. Lovett robed and disrobed. But here I was rather startled by coming upon the reverend gentleman seated in his surplice before a small table on which, spread on an old newspaper, were some sandwiches, a flask of sherry, and the tartlets Tessie had made the day before. Yet she did not seem to see anything in the sight incongruous with the words we had just heard fall from those lips, now besmeared with *compôte de fraises*.

‘Are they good, papa?’ she inquired affectionately.

‘Very good, my dear!’ he replied, with his mouth full; ‘but your second hymn was so short, I had no time to eat them before. You must look out a longer one for next Sunday! You forget the work I have to do whilst you are singing a couple of verses. Four is the very least I can accomplish it under.’

‘He *shall* have four—the dear old dad!’ exclaimed Ange, as she kissed the top of his head; ‘or six if he likes it better. Oh, papa! you were divine to-day. You made me cry so! How I wish we were all dead and safe in heaven together!’

‘Tut! tut! you silly little mouse!’ said her father, as he patted her rose-leaf cheek; ‘you mustn’t talk about being dead and buried just yet! You’ll have to put me under ground first, you know.’



‘Oh, papa! papa! *don't!*’ she cried, in a voice of real pain.

‘Well, then, trot home and see after the dinner being got ready in time. We are obliged to dine early to-day, my dear Hilda, in consideration of the proceedings of our domestic tyrant Madame Marmoret, who insists upon attending three services at her own church every Sunday, and disregarding everything she hears there on the remaining six days of the week.’

‘A very common practice, Mr. Lovett, with people much better instructed than Madame Marmoret.’

‘Very true, my dear! I wonder how many of my congregation of to-day will even remember, let alone practise, the precepts I have just preached to them. But come, little people, clear out of my vestry, for I want to resume my usual garb.’

I thought Ange was uncommonly thought-

ful that afternoon, and I could not help associating her mood with the information Mrs. Carolus had given me about the young man at Rille who had paid her so much attention, which had come to nothing.

— Was it possible, I thought, as I watched her sitting on the ground with her hands folded idly on her lap, and her sunny head laid against her father's knee, that her young heart could have suffered a disappointment, anything akin, in magnitude or bitterness, to that which had been experienced by my own? I could not believe it. The infidelity of Cave Charteris, whether it had been brought on by my credulous folly or his thoughtlessness, had left a mark upon me which I knew that nothing in this world could ever obliterate. I was not so young nor so blind as to imagine that I should never be happy again. I knew that men and women had sustained and conquered greater griefs

and more crushing shames than mine. But I no more believed that I should ever forget the awful pain my first disappointment had caused me, than that I should replace the dear friend and mother whose death had left a vacancy in my bruised heart that no mortal could fill again.

Ange seemed to me too young to have suffered in proportion with myself; not too young in years, but in spirit. How I envied the youthful gaiety with which she enjoyed her walks and talks, and simple occupations, the fresh laughter that burst from her, with her will or against it, at anything that touched her sense of ridicule; and the innocent mischief which made her love to tease her father or her sister, or even Madame, until she was compelled to win their pardon by her kisses.

No! Ange could never have passed through the same valley of suffering as I had! Its shadows would have frightened her light-

heartedness to death. Yet she was certainly very grave that afternoon, and very silent ; but, when I taxed her with it, she replied that she was always tired on Sundays, and wanted rest after the exertion of singing, or, as she expressed it, of ‘ bawling at the top of her voice, for two hours, without stopping.’ After which I was surprised, when tea was over, to see her come down into the sitting-room, robed for walking.

‘ Are you going out again, Ange ?’

‘ Yes, to evening church.’

‘ I thought there was only one service here.’

‘ Papa has only one ; but Monsieur l’Abbé has the regular number at his church. I always go there in the evening, the service is so beautiful. Will you come with me ?’

‘ I shall be delighted.’

It was nothing extraordinary in *me* to consent to attend a Catholic service, because

I was a very broad and muscular Christian indeed, bound, by my own conscience, to no creed nor church whatever, but ready to join in any prayers that satisfied my ideas of what religious worship should be, and to believe that the path that took him readiest to God was the right path for each man to walk in, irrespective of the pilot who led the way. But then I was not a minister of the Established Church of England, who had taken a very solemn oath to uphold her doctrines and protect her interests in every possible manner, and it seemed very strange to me that Mr. Lovett should like it to be known, in a little town like St. Pucelle, that his daughters attended the services of a Church whose doctrines were so diametrically opposed to those of his own.

‘Does your papa approve of your going to vespers at St. Marie?’ I said to Ange, as we walked there together.

‘Oh, Hilda! Do you suppose I should do so without his approval? Why, of course he does. And the Abbé Morteville is one of papa’s very best and most intimate friends.’

‘That may be. I see no reason whatever why a difference of religious opinion should have any effect upon the friendship of men. Still, I should have thought, as Mr. Lovett is a Protestant minister, that he would have been almost afraid to let you and Tessie attend the Catholic services.’

‘Why?’ she asked quickly.

‘For various reasons; the chief being, that you might be converted to Catholicism yourselves.’

‘I don’t think papa would object to it if we were! You don’t half know yet how good and generous and liberal-minded he is, Hilda. If he thought Tessie and I were fully persuaded that we should not be happy unless we became Catholics, he would never

oppose our wishes. But he need have no fear; at all events on my account. I shall never leave the English Church so long as he is in it.'

I admired the beautiful childlike faith which she had in her father, and in everything which he believed to be right, but I could not join in it. To me it seemed the most culpable negligence to allow a girl with so unformed a mind as that of Ange to attend regularly the offices of a church to which she did not belong. However, it was no concern of mine, and I was silent.

As we approached the porch of St. Marie, we met the Baron de Nesselrode.

'How do you do, M. le Baron?' exclaimed Ange. 'We are going to attend vespers this evening. Will you come with us?'

Armand de Nesselrode laughed uneasily.

'I am afraid you must excuse me,' he replied; 'it is a very long time since I have

seen the inside of a church, Mademoiselle Ange.'

'Is that so? What a sad confession! What would Monsieur l'Abbé say were he to hear it?'

'The truth, probably—that I am a lost sheep not worth the looking after.'

'Indeed he would not. I can answer for that. Monsieur l'Abbé is far too good to say such a thing of any one.'

'But he has given me up all the same, and he is wise to do so. He has too much occupation for his time to waste it upon a *vaurien* like myself. No one remembers me, Mademoiselle Ange. I am an outcast, and alone.'

*Alone!* The word struck painfully upon my ear. I had so often used it in reference to my own condition. And although Armand de Nesselrode laughed with apparent carelessness as he said it, I felt sure that he was suffering bitterly the while. I wished, at



that moment, that I could speak French as fluently as Ange did—that I might assure him that I could sympathise in his sense of solitude. But a foolish timidity bound my tongue. The young Baron spoke with a pure Parisian accent, and I was ashamed to air my boarding-school French before him. Yet, as he raised his hat to me in parting, I ventured to say, in a very low voice :

‘Monsieur, when we pray to-night, we will not forget you.’

A gleam of pleasure and sudden interest lit up the dark eyes which he fixed upon me.

‘I thank you—I thank you much, mademoiselle,’ he replied fervently, as we passed into the church.

When we returned home that evening, we went at once into the little sitting-room where Tessie was sitting by herself, reading.

‘Where is papa, Tessie?’

‘He has gone over to the Hôtel de la

Cloche to see Miss Markham. She sent up a note by Arthur Thrale to ask him to do so. I suppose the visitor they expected from Rille has arrived, and requires a little more amusement than can be extracted from poor old Mr. Carolus.'

Again that vivid burning blush on Ange's cheek, but she did not make any remark upon her sister's news. She only threw her hat and cape upon a chair, and, going up to the piano, sat down and commenced to play a hymn. It was a familiar one to all of us.

Tessie left her book and took a seat beside me, and put her arm round my waist, and we sang the words together. Amidst the noise which we made with our own voices, I could not distinguish if the little maid joined us or no. We had not finished the hymn, however, when the door from the *salle* softly opened, and the tall figure of the Baron de Nesselrode stood upon the threshold. We

would have stopped at once, but he motioned us to proceed, and stood there, with the door in his hand, until the hymn was concluded. Then he closed it behind him, and advanced into our midst.

‘Monsieur Lovett, I find, is not at home, so I ventured to come a little farther than the *salle*,’ he said to Tessie. ‘Will you continue your singing, Mademoiselle Ange? It is such a treat to me to listen to music. I never hear any now.’

‘You are fond of it, then, Monsieur le Baron?’

‘Passionately, mademoiselle. At one time I thought I could never live without it. But one is forced to learn hard lessons in this world. There is a fine organ up at my old château, but it has not been opened for years; and I conclude that, like its owner, it is ruined.’

‘What a pity! You should have it

examined. Why not get the opinion of the organist of St. Marie upon it ?

‘ I would rather have the opinion of you, demoiselles, if you would graciously accord it to me. Do you think Monsieur votre père would so far honour me as to bring you all up to the château some day, that you may see and pronounce on the merits of my poor old organ for yourselves ?’

‘ We will ask papa, Monsieur le Baron, but I do not think he will have any objection.’

‘ Objection !’ cried Ange, wheeling round on her music-stool, ‘ I should think not. I won’t let him have an objection. Tessie and I have so often longed to see your château, Monsieur le Baron—the dear old romantic tumbled-down place. I have peeped over the wall dozens of times, and picked all the roses within my reach, but of course I dared not venture within the gates, it would not have been *comme-il-faut* !’

‘A dear old romantic tumbled-down place,’ repeated the Baron, bitterly. ‘Yes! that is the fittest name for the only rest my folly has left for the sole of my foot. Bah! do not let us talk of it any more. Monsieur will bring you to visit me there, I trust, and old Denise shall receive you with all the reverence befitting your own position, if not with the luxury a De Nesselrode should be able to lavish upon his guests. Sing to me again, mesdemoiselles. Let me forget the memories this little conversation has provoked, in listening to your voices.’

So Ange struck up the plaintive air of ‘Sun of my soul,’ and we all joined in the evening hymn together. Its last chords were dying away, when Mr. Lovett’s footstep was heard entering the *salle*. The Baron rose at once to join him, but before he had time to leave the room, Tessie and Ange had flown past him to welcome their father home. Con-

sequently, he and I were left for one brief moment together.

‘ Did you forget your promise, mademoiselle ?’ he asked me, in a low earnest voice.

‘ I did not, monsieur.’

He made no answer, but he threw one long searching glance upon me before he left the room, and I sat there thinking what a pity it was that he was so careless and dissipated, and what a desirable husband he would make for Tessie, if he could only be converted to see the errors of his ways.



## CHAPTER X.

### CHÂTEAU DES ROSES.

I THOUGHT of this long after I went to bed that night, and for several succeeding days. I felt sure that Tessie liked the Baron, and indeed few girls with hearts that were disengaged could have helped doing so. He was very handsome, with that dark Southern beauty which bespeaks fire and energy, and all that makes a man attractive to a woman. And he was interesting—a more dangerous circumstance still. A halo of romance hung around his ill-fortune and his solitude, even

though both had been induced by his own misdeeds. And I doubt, moreover, whether a man's errors, unless directed towards herself, ever closed a woman's heart against him. Although we are but too often the tempters and destroyers of the other sex, we like to flatter ourselves with the idea that we were sent into this world to be their guardian angels. The instinct of maternity, too, is rampant in the breasts of most of us, and a sick man or a naughty man is for the time being very like a child, something that is to be petted and tended and caressed, or coaxed and reprimanded and forgiven. I never heard the girls mention the young Baron de Nesselrode without a word of pity or excuse, and I too had much the same feeling for him.

But I had heard that his present state of poverty was not to last for ever. The interest of his large fortune alone was being



annually swallowed by his greedy creditors ; and if the Baron could only be persuaded to lose no more money in the interim, a few years' probation would certainly set him free again. Meanwhile his family had utterly refused to assist him, over which piece of cruelty I had heard Tessie properly indignant. But privately I argued that in all probability his family had not the means of doing so. The Baron de Nesselrode was the representative of his race, and his relations were naturally incensed to find that his extravagance had led him to represent it in a ruinous old château at St. Pucelle.

The great thing to be done now, I said to myself, was to persuade him to give up that fatal habit of gambling, which we heard that he still continued to practise at more than one private house in the town.

If he would only learn to be wise in time, and to see the beauties of Tessie's character

as I saw them, what a charming couple they would make! She was so thoroughly good and amiable. Each day I seemed to discover some fresh trait in her disposition which rendered her more worthy of my affection; and I pictured her to myself as the future *Baronne de Nesselrode*, and thought how well she would look the part, and how faithfully she would discharge the duties of her position as wife and mother and mistress of the household.

I wonder now why I never thought of the probability of the Baron preferring Ange to her sister—Ange, with her lovely, ever-changing countenance, her childlike gaiety of disposition, her ardent faith in religion and her father—but it never struck me that it might be so.

Tessie, with her quiet, somewhat pensive air, and her softly-braided flaxen locks, was always the ideal *Baronne* that figured in my

airy castles ; whilst bright-haired, blushing Ange was nowhere.

But the first thing, of course, to be done was to convert Armand de Nesselrode ; and with that idea seething in my brain, I was very pleased, a few days afterwards, to hear that Mr. Lovett had arranged to take us all over to the château that very afternoon.

‘Hilda, it will be delightful!’ cried Ange, dancing about me in her glee. ‘You don’t know how often Tessie and I have longed to see inside the old château.’

‘And Monsieur le Baron has never asked you all these years?’

‘Never once—until last Sunday ; indeed, I believe we shall be the first people in St. Pucelle who have set foot inside it. The poor Baron is ashamed of his poverty, so Madame says. I know he has only one servant to wait on him : I have seen her at market. She looks like a veritable old

*châtelaine*. I should never dare to ask her to clean my boots. But I must go, Hilda, or I shall not be back again by twelve o'clock. I have five people to call upon within an hour.'

And off she ran, with a little basket on her arm, to see her poor.

I have forgotten to mention what a charitable heart Ange Lovett had. Not the charity that enters poor people's homes without knocking, and sows good advice and platitudes broadcast, to bring up a crop of curses and complaints; but a large-hearted love, that saw no distinction between herself and them except that made by poverty, and greater need of friendship. When I saw her stop and salute her humbler friends, I was not surprised to hear they called her '*Petite Ange*' even to that day.

Yet she carried them neither food nor money: she had none to spare. The basket on her arm held some trifling remembrance,

perhaps : a rag doll, manufactured by herself, for a sick child ; the Sunday cap of some old woman which she had turned and made to look as good as new ; or a bottle of physic for cough or ague, concocted by Madame Marmoret, and which was about the only thing in which that unpleasant domestic seemed willing to accommodate herself to the wishes of her young mistresses. So, although Ange possessed nothing wherewith to win the affections of her poor neighbours, beyond her ready sympathy and beaming smile, she was the cherished friend of every one of them ; and even the Abbé Morteville used to say that he always knew, when called upon to visit the sick, if the little Angel of St. Pucelle had been there before him or no. Sweet Ange ! She used to laugh at Tessie and me, and call us lazy, because we did not join her in her work of love ; but the fact was that she left us nothing to do. There was scarcely

a day that she had not flitted in and out of half the cottages in St. Pucelle. She lived amongst the poor as though she had been one of themselves.

We were an expectant party as we walked up together to the Château des Roses, as the Baron's domicile was romantically called, for the girls had talked to me so much on the subject, that I had become almost as curious to find myself within its walls as they were. I found that the château was situated quite a mile away from St. Pucelle. Two massive pillars that had once supported the gates, and were surmounted by wolves' heads carved in stone, the armorial bearing of the family of De Nesselrode, became visible some time before we reached the entrance. When we had gained it, we discovered that the way was open : the gate being off its hinges and thrown carelessly amongst the bushes within. To the top of either pillar had climbed a

rose-tree, the fragrant blossoms of which were hanging halfway to the ground ; whilst various costly shrubs, which had once been planted about the entrance with a due regard to effect, had obtruded their luxuriant growth until it encroached upon the highway.

‘ Is not this a regular wilderness of sweets ? ’ said Angela. ‘ These are the roses, papa, that I told the Baron I had so often picked in passing. I wonder if he has more of them within ; for if so, I must steal a bouquet before we return again.’

We had little time to wonder, for as we took our way to the château by a pathway cut through the pinewood, which sheltered it on three sides from the mountain air, we discovered that it well deserved its name. We seemed to be surrounded by roses of every size and colour. They ran along the ground at our feet, they hung in clusters from the trees at our side, they entangled themselves

in the skirts of our dresses and caught the flimsy trimmings of our hats. For myself, I thought I had never traversed such a labyrinth of beauty ; though the rose-trees, in common with everything else, bore the appearance of a long-sustained and utter neglect.

As we came in sight of the fine old château, which had originally been built of grey granite, but was much disfigured by having been restored in various places by common red brick, we saw our host approaching to greet us. He looked so picturesque in a black velvet coat, with a little handkerchief of grey silk carelessly knotted about his throat, that I could not resist glancing at Tessie to see how his appearance struck her. To my disappointment, she was not looking at the Baron at all, but busily engaged in fastening a bunch of yellow rosebuds in her bosom.



Well, Tessie cared for something higher than mere outward seeming: perhaps. So much the better! Her happiness, when it came, would be all the more lasting and to be depended on. Still, Monsieur le Baron did look very graceful and aristocratic in his artistic suit—there was no manner of doubt about that!

We all rushed at him, open-mouthed, with praises of his lovely roses.

‘*Ah, les roses,*’ he said, indifferently.

Yes, they are very abundant; and I am only too flattered that mesdemoiselles should deign to honour my poor flowers with their regard! But my little *gouÿter* is waiting for you, and I trust that your walk has given you an appetite. Mademoiselle, will you ‘permit me to conduct you into the Château des Roses?’

He offered his arm to me as he spoke, and I was surprised that he should not have chosen

Tessie instead, until I remembered that Mr. Lovett had told several of his friends that he regarded me as his eldest daughter.

The entrance-hall to the château was very imposing ; only, had I not known it was inhabited by a gentleman of the nineteenth century, I should certainly have imagined I was being introduced to the residence of some feudal chief of the tenth instead. Suits of armour, coated with rust, covered the walls ; on the stone floor were laid numerous rough skins of animals which the Baron had killed in the chase. A stand, filled with all sorts of murderous weapons, ornamented one end of the hall ; whilst on the other hung an arras of tapestry, faded into indistinctness and moth-eaten, until it would hardly hold together. Here we encountered Denise, the old *châtelaine*, as Ange had designated her—an ancient dame who had once been the Baron's nurse, and had followed him into his exile with a

fidelity as rare as it is beautiful. As I saw this old servant, whose appearance was the very picture of modest decorum, receiving her young master's guests with as much state as though she had had a band of domestics behind her to execute her orders, I could not help thinking that there must be something good left in the man who, in the midst of misfortune brought on his own head, could yet command the service and fidelity of so thoroughly respectable a woman.

‘Denise,’ said the Baron, ‘these young ladies have condescended to honour the château with their presence for a few hours. I commend them, during their visit, to your care.’

‘Will mesdemoiselles follow me upstairs and remove their walking attire before partaking of *gôûter*?’ inquired the old servant, and we were very thankful, after a hot and dusty walk, to bathe our hands and faces in

the cool spring water she had provided for us.

‘I never saw anything like this in my life before,’ exclaimed Tessie, as we followed Denise up a wide staircase into a long corridor lined with flapping tapestry, and ornamented with grim oil-paintings of the martyred saints. ‘Could you not fancy, Hilda, this corridor at dead of night peopled with the ghosts of these poor martyrs and ringing with their groans?’

Old Denise crossed herself.

‘Do not speak of it, mademoiselle,’ she said. ‘The blessed martyrs are in heaven, and would not return to this earth if they could; and as for the spirits of others, surely *Le bon Dieu* would never permit them to terrify a poor old woman like me. Though, for the matter of that, there has always been a legend in our family that one of my dear master’s noble ancestors, Le Sieur Armand de

Valois, still walks the Château des Roses, which was his favourite summer residence when alive; and that is the reason, mesdemoiselles, that the old house is in so sad a condition of ruin and decay, for no one has cared to keep it up or live in it.'

'I wonder you were not afraid to come here, then, madame,' I remarked.

'I should not have been afraid to go anywhere with my dear master, mademoiselle; and since those thieves who stripped him of his rightful property left him no shelter but this, why I had no choice but to follow and take care of him.'

'It does you honour!' said Tessie, as we entered the bed-chamber.

Such a chamber! uncarpeted and uncurtained, with a huge bedstead of carved oak, a Venetian mirror which distorted our features until we did not recognise ourselves—and for the purposes of washing, a brass ewer

and basin shining like burnished gold, but placed upon a table of ebony. The towels offered us were of the finest fringed damask, but Denise was profuse in her apologies for the humbleness of the accommodation she had prepared.

‘This is not as it should be,’ she said sorrowfully, ‘but mesdemoiselles must be gracious and overlook our poverty. When Monsieur le Baron told me that ladies were coming to the château, you might have knocked me down with a feather. “Ladies,” I said, “and not a room to show them into.”’

‘But my dear master assured me you would excuse it. Ah, mesdemoiselles! until those thieves and robbers restore his rights to him, what can you expect? We have no money to replace these things. But when that day comes,’ exclaimed the old woman, brightening up, ‘then his friends and his enemies alike shall see what the Baron de Nesselrode

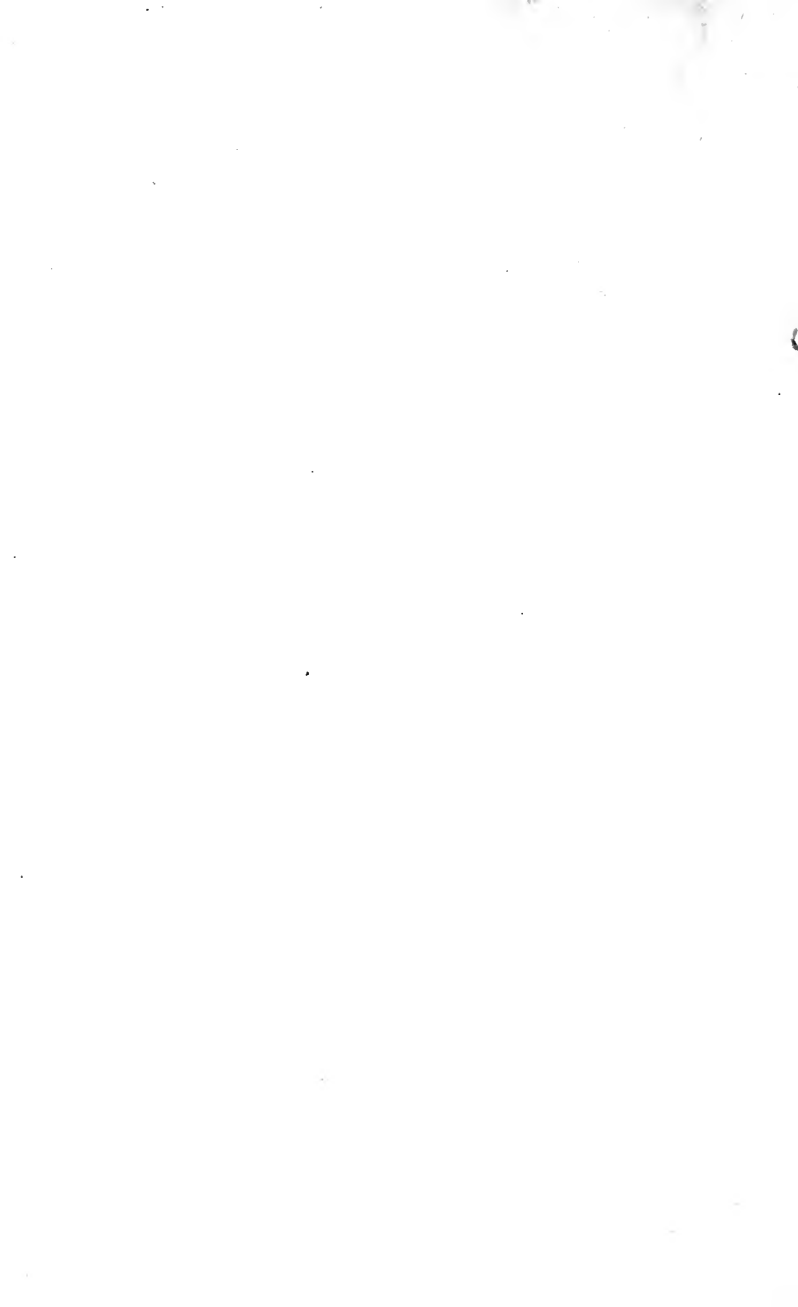
can do. They shall be fine times, mesdemoiselles, when we go back to our château at Versailles, and our chalet in beautiful Switzerland, and above all, our hôtel in Paris. The Château des Roses may fall to the ground then—we shall need it no longer. But, meanwhile, we have sore need of patience—Heaven knows !

‘But this is all very beautiful,’ I said. ‘What could be better ? I would not have it changed for worlds, if it were mine.’

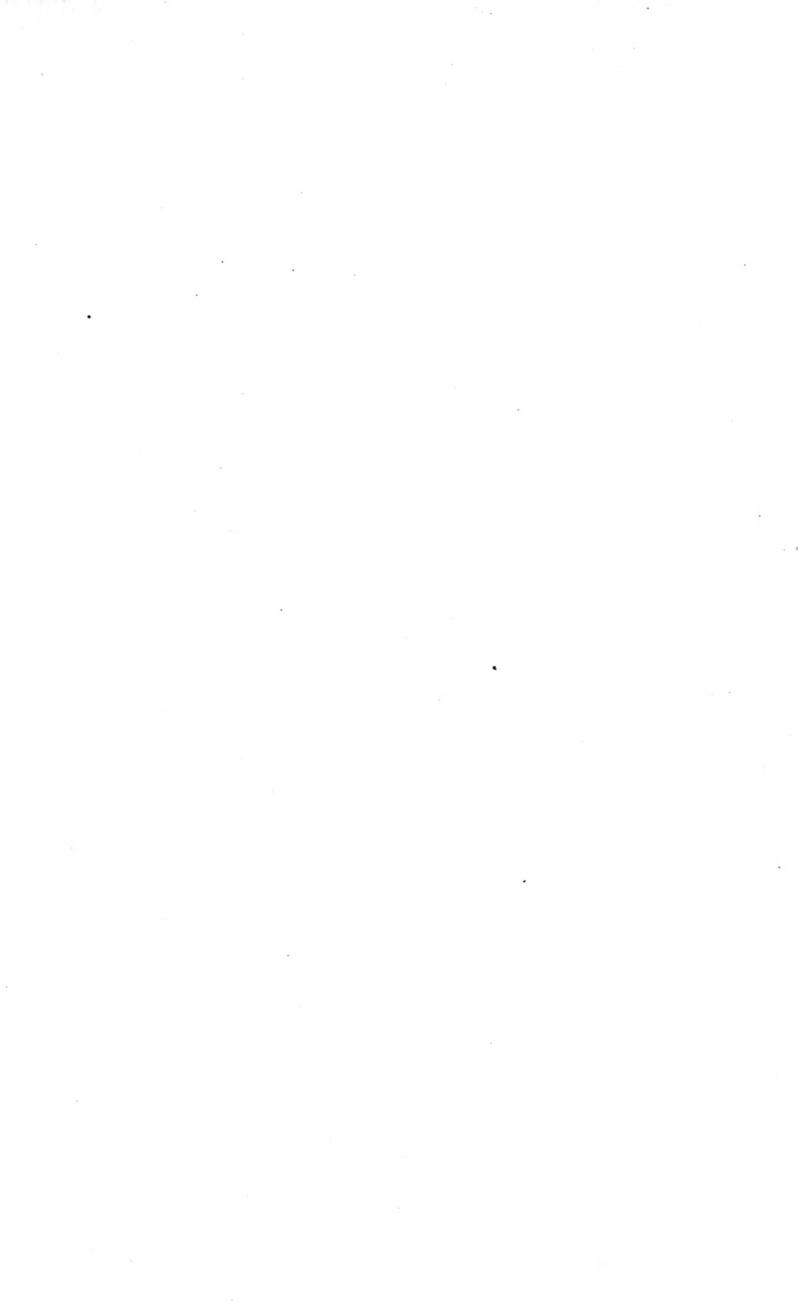
Denise shook her head despondently.

‘Mademoiselle is too good to say so,’ she replied, ‘but if she and these young ladies will excuse me, I will descend again and see that the *salle* is prepared for their reception.’

END OF VOL. I.











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